

The Cursed Girl: Novel Excerpt

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

In the Kingdom of Eddor, Princess Asta has been locked away for too long. When she gets out, she's ready for revenge on her father the King, who locked her away in the first place. As she goes on a journey to rid herself of a curse she's had since birth, she must reconcile with her searing need for revenge, and learn what her freedom might cost. Along for the journey is Dane, a castle guard with his own bitter agenda. Together with their group, they must find a mysterious sorceress and uncover the truth of Asta's curse. In this story of freedom, duty, and vengeance, Asta must decide what matters to her most – revenge, or the potential of freedom.

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Thank you to my mom, who always encourages my creative spirit and writing. I wouldn't be a writer without you.

Process Analysis

As a culmination of my academic achievements at Ball State, I chose to attempt my long-term goal of writing a novel. Many classes over the course of my four years here at Ball State have motivated me to write this story, and I have taken ideas, writing tactics, and creative inspiration from my honors classes and my major classes to help create this novel.

Though I consider myself a writer, this particular project was a much larger feat than I had ever attempted in the past. This is the longest I have stood with a project, and the process has been difficult but very rewarding. Writing *The Cursed girl* has shown me a great deal about my behaviors and tendencies as a writer, as well as what books I might be best suited to write. At the start of the process, I had a simple story and a few characters, and over the course of my writing, I discovered what more my novel could be aside from a simple story or plotline. My writing tended to lean toward internal emotions and the weight those emotions have on the characters. As I kept writing, I found out what more my novel could mean to the reader. My thesis demonstrates this writing, and how I learned so much through writing my novel so far.

One of the most difficult aspects of this project was learning more about myself as a writer. Writers have many different habits and routines as they work through their stories, and discovering this for myself was a large part of this process. Before I began to write *The Cursed Girl*, I knew that I would need an outline of some sort. I have attempted novels in the past, and lack of direction or solid plot has always kept me from getting far into manuscripts. For this thesis, I knew to be

prepared. To do this, I mapped out my plot with notecards. This way of planning was suggested to me by my advisor, Angela Jackson-Brown, and was also mentioned in the book I read last semester on writing, *90 Days to Your Novel* by Sarah Domet. This way of planning my novel gave me a short, succinct summary of what each scene or chapter contained, and what themes I might bring up in the section. It is not overly detailed, which gave me the freedom to write as I was led; yet it still kept me on track for the next chapter or scene. It was a good way for me to write through my novel, and I believe I will stick to this organizational tool as I finish this novel and go on to others.

Another important aspect of my writing this semester was finding time to do so. Some writers keep a very detailed and strict schedule, while others write in spurts for solid hours. I knew that finding time would be difficult as a full time student, so I did my best to pick out consistent times and places to write. My schedule is heavier in the afternoons and evenings, so I planned to write in the mornings, but as the days went by, I realized that this approach would not work for me. I am not an early bird by and means, and I found myself not getting up to write, therefore having no time throughout the rest of the day to work on my novel. I switched to writing at night, when I feel more awake and alert, and this helped me get more writing done and have a more regular time to sit down and work through difficult spots in my writing. Being diligent about my time was a huge struggle for me, and I have learned over this process that I need to make a very strict schedule for myself or I will not get to my writing. Because of this, I found myself not meeting my full goal for this project: a completed novel. This process was a learning

experience, though, and I am still happy about what I have learned and accomplished through this. I will take these skills I have learned and apply them as I continue to write and finish this novel.

Aside from practical skills and knowing myself as a writer, I also wanted to develop my writing and focus on specific themes throughout my novel. I believe I did this, and I learned so much more about my writing than I had previously anticipated. I knew I wanted to center my main character's arc on her need for revenge and her desire for freedom. Asta is a character that hones in on one feeling and takes it as far as she can. It has been interesting exploring her character and writing her with this deep, emotional baggage. I wanted to attempt this because I believe that oftentimes people push aside their emotions or traumas to "be" the person they think they should be, and I wanted to show that Asta – with all of her shortcomings, with all of her strong emotions – is a character worth loving. Not all of her is good, but in the end, the good outweighs the bad. People experience deep emotional traumas, and while most are not like Asta's (being held against her will for three years), people still experience strong emotions that they do not know how to process alone. I wanted to give readers a character that might reveal a bit about themselves, or reflect on who they are or used to be. I firmly believe that the past does not define a person, and though it may hang on to them and haunt them for a while, each person deserves healing and love in their own right. I wanted Asta to be an example of this, and to show people that a damaged character is still a loveable character. She lives with her past tugging at her: revenge often consumes her, and she frequently experiences anxiety attacks, and while these things are a part of her,

they do not define her. I wanted Asta to have this history and *still* be the strong female lead readers see today in many books. I wanted her to still have a fighter's spirit while living with the past that will not let go. I can only hope I have achieved this through her character. Through dialogue, actions, and even her thoughts, I hoped these themes would show.

Dane is the other lead character in this story, second only to Asta. With his character, I strived for similar goals. Dane holds bitterness toward Asta for a very specific reason, and one of his largest struggles throughout the novel is him reconciling with this bitterness, and trying to separate his anger toward her mixed with his close relationship with her. He holds this resentment, and he must learn to put this aside as he realizes his feelings for her. In their relationship specifically, I wanted to delve into the way people without anxiety address and care for people with anxiety. We see Asta's anxiety flare up several times when Dane is with her, and in response, Dane must learn how to help her come back to the present moment. Living with anxiety is much more difficult when those around you do not understand or empathize with you, and I wanted to see Dane take all of this in and decide that Asta is still worth caring about, still worth going after. Dane works through many anxiety related issues with Asta, being there when she needs him even though he might not understand how she feels. This was such an important topic for me because others have a tendency to run away from people with anxiety or illnesses like it. In my novel, I wanted to normalize this disease and show that no matter the condition, there are ways to love and care about a person with a mental illness. Dane makes mistakes often throughout the novel. He forgets about her

anxiety, he does not remember to consider it, but as he learns and grows closer to Asta, he learns to care for that part of her as well, and possibly love her more because of her strength though her anxiety.

Old Norse language and mythology helped inspire a lot of the world building of this novel. I know that fantasy often draws from history, and that many fantastical worlds were actually built in real historical kingdoms, dynasties, or empires. Though many writers take from Greek or Roman mythology, I decided to try something else while writing my novel. I have always been intrigued by Old Norse culture and the Vikings, and in my novel I decided to pull from that culture and time period to frame some of my fictional world. This has been one of the biggest struggles of the writing process so far, and I still believe that I have a long way to go before the themes are fully integrated well into my text. Many of the “Eddorian” words I use have been pulled from Old Norse language, and a lot of the garments worn by the characters have their roots in Viking/Norse culture. As a writer, it has been an interesting time finding inspiration from this culture and time period. There is so much to learn about the history, and so far I believe I have only scratched the surface of what I could learn and integrate into my writing. It was difficult to find a balance between my own world I wanted to create and what I used to inspire my writing from Norse myth. The names in the novel are all from Norse (or old European) origin, and the culture of storytelling in my fantastical country of Eddor was based on the large culture of storytelling in the Old Norse Myths.

In terms of readership, my target audience is teens and young adults, putting my novel into the YA genre, specifically fantasy. I have substantial experience

reading this particular genre, and I believe that the tone, style, and events in my novel fit well with the full spread of today's YA fantasy. I want readers to learn that strong female lead characters are allowed to be damaged or flawed, and hopefully they can also understand that *they* are also allowed to be that way and still be strong. I also want readers to see the healthy friendships and relationships in my novel and strive for those in their own lives. I believe that my clearly depicts whether certain relationships are healthy or not, and I hope that readers can see this and find people in their lives that lift them up and help them along their journey, rather than sticking with people who pull them back.

I have learned so much about myself from this novel, and I am going to take everything I have learned from this process and use it as I continue to write this novel and hopefully others in the future. So many classes, project, and papers have helped me gain the skills I needed for this thesis, and this novel is the best way I know how to showcase everything I have learned at Ball State. This has been a difficult, arduous, yet ultimately rewarding Honors Thesis, and I have now learned to appreciate writers and artists in a new way. Creating is hard work, but this semester has taught me that all of the hard work pays off after creating something you have always wanted to achieve.

Prologue

Only few know the truth of the Princess' Curse.

It is all about the sorceress who cast it.

This sorceress was once a young girl, a very fair girl. A very fair girl who the King favored.

When a bastard child was born from their secret union, the king – young, angry at his mistake – had the child killed. This was plenty enough reason for the sorceress to get revenge. She cursed the royals.

And the curse is this: when their first child is born, her skin will be the life of the forest, and her heart will be the lifeblood of the Kingdom of Eddor. If she should die, the Kingdom shall perish around her.

The sorceress meant to show the King how very valuable every small life is – and how he had taken a life from her.

And so her curse took hold on the day the King and Queen's first child was born. Every time the child fell ill, the city would fall into drought. Each time she was cut, the gardens of the castle would wilt.

And each time the child was harmed, a part of Eddor fell away.

This child – a girl – lived normally as the crown princess until the day she fell down a stone staircase.

Every step she hit as she fell took more life from Eddor. The castle grounds were barren for months. Drought took over the capital city of Boer and affected the neighboring lands. Eddor was in devastation. She was the epicenter of disaster.

After this, the King forced the Princess – his one and only heir – to live in the basement of the Grand Castle, so no harm would befall her. And ever since the girl was thirteen years old, she has lived down there, and the Kingdom prospered and grew back to what it was.

There were many rumors about the young heiress – that she was merely skin and bones, that she was a monster, that she died years ago – but no one is certain. The only certainty was this: Eddor was safe with the girl hidden away.

Chapter 1

I have no windows. No way to see what's outside, to breathe the air beyond. All I breathe is this basement, this dust. That feeling returns, the one that tightens my chest and sucks the breath from my lungs. I'm trapped in here. I think about it every day. Trapped, trapped in this prison-bedroom. My parents put me here. They also happen to be the King and Queen. I'm supposed to be the Princess. But I'm not a Princess, I'm a prisoner.

I sit up from my bed, looking around the same room I've looked at for too many days. The funny thing is, my father tried to make it look like any other room in this castle: wooden closet, a now threadbare rug on the floor, and other useless things put here to look "comforting." They couldn't have just given me a damn window? I don't even know what season it is.

I lost track of everything over these three years. First it was time, days leaking into nights until my body couldn't tell the difference. Then it was people.

Mom never visited -- probably for shame of what she and father had done -- and I can't exactly remember the sound of her voice. My professors, music teachers, all of them disappeared from my memories. They left plenty of books for me to read though -- and I read them. Over and over.

I might be crazy.

Walking over to my dresser takes four steps. Opening the second drawer from the top takes both hands, because it's broken and doesn't run straight. My fingers touch the familiar wood and I pull. Seven copies of the same dress lay inside. I pull one out for the day. As if I'm going anywhere.

And then I know I'm crazy, because I hear my door clicking open. The door that's been locked and sealed completely for three years. I know it's not my breakfast or lunch (what time is it?), because that is always passed through a crude box-shaped hole in my wall. Last year I tried to shove myself through that same hole, and I could only get one thigh through before a guard *gently* pushed my leg back in. *It's for your safety, Asta.* My safety? Yeah right.

My dress is halfway down my body, and I'm *sure* I heard the door click. I might be crazy, but I heard it. I know it. I freeze, not caring whether or not my clothes are on or off.

Painfully slowly, the door opens. In the doorway stands a boy. My dress is still bunched up around my waist, and I quickly shove it down into place over my legs.

"Princess Asta?" the guard says. He's all thick muscle, but he can't be much older than I am now, around seventeen.

I've prepared for this moment since the day my father closed this door on me. Every day, I imagine ripping a bedpost from my bed and swinging it at whoever opens the door. Then I imagine running past the person out of the room and away from this castle forever. I'd only stop to say a quick goodbye to my father that involves a knife (or maybe a bow and arrow), and then I'd be gone. Free.

But instead of all that, I just say

"Yes?" like an idiot.

He takes a step into the room. I take a step back.

"Your presence is requested by the King. It's important," he says. The King? I could use a word with my father. A few, actually. Blood pumps in my temples. Part of me believes that is a dream, that I will wake up in a cold sweat and in a locked room. I glance at the open doorway.

I could make it.

If I can get past him, I could make it out.

"Princess?" the boy says, lowering his gaze to mine, looking directly at me. Thoughts shoot across my head. Why does my father want me? What's happening? Why now? Do I really want to leave? Things must have changed since I was outside. Outside.

I look at the door.

The boy blocks my vision again. He's looking at me like I'm a scared animal, as if I might pounce or crumble or scream. I don't really blame him. That's probably exactly what I look like.

"Why?" I ask him, eyes still straining toward the door. I will leave this room today. This is my first decent chance at escape. I pull in stale air and push it out my nostrils, preparing myself.

I'm going to run. He won't be fast enough. I hope.

"Why what?" he smells of trees and wind and a little bit of sweat. He's close to me.

"Why does the King want to see me?" This time I am the one who takes a step toward him. Something flashes in his eyes, some emotion I don't understand.

"He--" the boy starts, but doesn't get to finish. I lunge toward the door, past him, jumping toward my goal for years - outside. My mind screams one thing: *free*.

But I'm wrong. The boy saw this coming. *Dammit*.

His arms wrap around me, stopping the momentum of my body heading toward the door. The amount of human contact shocks me and for a moment, I forget everything. His thick arms are around my middle, pulling me back. My hands are on his bare wrists, straining for freedom. His breath on my neck. My back, pressed against his chest.

And then I remember he's trapping me. Holding me in here.

"Stop," I say, but it comes out in a choke. My lungs are empty, and I try to suck in air, but nothing comes. I'm trapped. He's still holding me.

My fingernails scratch frantically at his arms. I have to get out. Out of his arms, out of this room. I don't want to be a captive anymore. I'm afraid of what's outside of this room, but I'm more terrified of life in here.

"Hey, hey," his voice breaks through my thoughts. Air still isn't coming. I can't breathe. His arms loosen on me, and instead of holding me back they're holding me up. "Breathe, Princess." He turns me to face him, chest to chest, and he gives me some space in the circle of his arms. I push away from him and fall to my hands and knees.

There's still no air. This happens to me sometimes, on those days I sit at the door and try the lock over and over again. I can't get out. I panic. And now it's happening in front of this stranger.

"Are you alright?" he asks, bending down to look at me. *Does it look like I'm alright?*

He places one of his hands on my back gently, as if to help, but I move away from him. I need space.

My breathing evens out after a minute or two. The boy stays next to me -- though admittedly farther away -- while I calm down. I stare at the floor while I try to even my breathing, looking at my fingers splayed on the hard stone.

It's times like these when I wonder what really happens to the world outside when I'm hurt. Does the wind pick up? Do the trees die? Do fires begin? I know about who I am, I know why I'm in here, but the only things I know about the curse itself are what I have read in my storybook one of the professors left for me long ago.

"Princess?" his voice shakes me into reality once again. My breath has returned. The dress I just put on has risen up above my knees, and my hair covers my eyes. I must look rabid. That's probably why this boy is looking at me like he is.

I look into his eyes. Dark brown and wide open.

"Is it over?" he asks me.

I nod. It's over. For now. He stands slowly and holds his hand out to me.

"Would you like help? I won't do that again, I promise," he tells me. Why would I have any reason to believe this stranger? The first person I've actually fully seen in years.

"Who are you?" I ask. He stands still, not answering. I ask again. No answer.

"Are you willing to go upstairs?" is all he says.

"Do I actually have a choice?" Either way, leaving is the goal. It's one step closer to freedom. That doesn't mean I'm safe.

"Not really," he says, expression neutral. I nod.

"Fine," I say, and I step through my doorway. Maybe my father has found a way to work around the curse and kill me. Maybe he's found his loophole. I don't care. Me getting out of this room means I am one step closer to the man who has taken years of my life away.

I walk with the guard up the stairs of the castle basement, out of my prison. Toward my father -- who I plan to kill.

Chapter 2

"Your hair is very thin," says one of the women pulling at my blonde strands. "It's weak. Breaks easily." The guard -- and two other huge men even larger than him -- have escorted me out of the basement and into the room that used to be mine, the room made for the Princess. Her fingers pull again, and I shove her hand away

from my hair. My goal right now is to find my father, not to get made over by these women.

"And she *is* very skinny-looking," a stocky red haired woman says, scanning my face in the mirror. Her lips push into a grimace. My appearance isn't pleasing to her. I don't care. I frown right back at her. My eyes flick to the mirror, still. Though I might not care what she thinks, I'm curious as to what I look like.

I haven't seen myself in a very long time, and I can't help but stare at myself in this desk mirror. They took my mirror away last year, after I shattered it with my fist and tried to cut myself. Once my father started to notice the gardens wilting around him, he sent guards to come stop me. *Eddor depends on your safety*, was the message he'd sent to me through the guards. They took my mirror and all other sharp objects that I might use to do damage. My father thought I'd be safe locked in the basement, so I tried to show him that I can cause damage anywhere. He still didn't let me out.

But the woman gazing at me in the mirror is right. My eyes look sunken, dark circles ringing them, and my cheeks are hollow. I look sick.

They've put me in a dark green dress that brushes at my ankles and pulls tightly at my waist. I reach my hand up to pull at the high neckline and the broaches on my overtunic.

"Stop that, you'll stretch it out," the red-haired one says, and I turn to her.

"If you told me what all this was for, I might be more likely to listen to your demands," I say, frustration seeping into my words. I'm just biding my time until I can find a way to get to my father.

"Not allowed," she says. She then picks up a tin of powder and a brush. She dusts the powder onto me, and despite my attempts to push her arm away, she succeeds in covering my face. Looking in the mirror once more, I'm even whiter than I was before coming in here. I cough at some of the dust still in the air.

"Just tell me. It's got to be something big," I say, glancing behind me to the guard who opened my door this morning. He's been standing at the back of the room, silent, since these women changed my clothes. Something is wrong. I intend to find out.

"There," the taller woman says, examining my hair. It has been pulled into two braids trailing down my back.

"What is all of this for?" I ask my voice rising. "What is going on?"

"The King requests your presence," the boy in the back of the room says to me again.

"Why?" I stand quickly, and the women around me back up quickly. As I stalk over toward the guard, he makes no move to back away from me. I rush into his personal space and blood heats in my veins. *My father must have found a way to kill me without letting the curse harm the land. He's found some way to dispose of me.*

"What does my shameful father have to say to me after all this time? After years of leaving me to rot in the basement of this castle? What could he possibly want with me now?" I nearly scream at him.

I haven't used my voice very much – only having myself to talk to – and it shows when I speak. My voice is scratchy, hoarse. Unused.

The boy's lips pull downward into a frown. He's not going to speak. I suck in a breath to yell again, but a hand rests gently on my shoulder. Shocked at the human contact, I shake it off and whirl to see who touched me. The shorter, red haired woman stands behind me.

"You shouldn't be upset, Princess Asta. The King has *good* plans for you, it's not so bad as you imagine," she says. And then she winks at me. *Winking? What could my father have set up for me that elicits winking?* And then I realize: the dress, the makeup, the hair.

"He's betrothed me to someone," I say aloud. The women who dressed me and made me up giggle to one another. To them, this is gossip. Good news.

To me, it's yet another reason to hate my father. I lift up the skirt of the dress so I'm able to walk quickly, and try to calm my voice as I say,

"Let me see him, then. Take me to my father." So I can rip my fingernails along his kingly face. First, he locks me in the basement. Next, he marries me away.

"We're to take you into the foyer, to meet your mother and some guests. The king will not be there," the boy says. No. My father will face me.

"What is your name?" I ask him.

"My name is Dane, your highness," he replies, stoic and still as ever.

"*Well*, Dane, I suggest you take me to my father – not the foyer – because I specifically need to talk to him. Now. Before I meet guests," I say with as much malice as I can portray.

He shakes his head slightly back and forth, denying me. I shouldn't be surprised. A princess locked in a basement for three years is really no princess at all.

I've got plenty of smarts, but no commanding royal speech. No regal presence.

Nothing that scares this guard.

"It would be easiest if you would come willingly," he says quietly to me, alluding to our first encounter in my room. They're going to force me if I don't come with them.

"Please." A begging princess. Father would be so proud of what he's let me become.

"I'm sorry," is all he says in response. I look to the women who braided my hair and gave me clothing. The brown-haired woman looks at the ground, and the shorter one looks at me with pity. *No one will help me, then.*

Alright, then.

"Fine," I say. "Fine."

I slip on the worn leather hide shoes the women give me, and I when I twist the doorknob to the room, it opens. Before stepping out, I see myself once more in the mirror. My hair, though thin, looks well kempt, and despite the anger pouring out of my eyes, my face looks feminine, beautiful. I'm older than I last saw myself. I'm more resolved than I used to be. And I am not the same girl my father put in that basement.

I'm a girl who can ruin a good betrothal, surely.

"Let's go."

The guard, Dane, takes my arm as we walk through the hall and go down the staircase. I try to shake him off, but he only replies with "It is for your safety. You know your curse. You know what's happened before."

He's making me like him less and less. With my free hand, I readjust the broaches pinned onto my *hangerock*. The heavy metal pieces add unnecessary weight to my outfit.

"Prepare yourself," Dane says quietly to me as we near the bottom of the dark stone staircase. "The King has – he has betrothed you to an Ontaran."

Ontara. Our neighbor to the west. And Eddor's sworn enemy.

My breath rushes out of me. An *Ontaran*? I shouldn't be surprised, but the fact that my father has betrayed me in this way leaves me searching for air. A few short gasps escape my lips.

"Why?" I manage to ask.

"Princess," Dane says, supporting more of my weight. "I said it to warn you. Breathe." And I do. Barely.

"Thank you for telling me." I say to him. When we step out into the foyer, I see that he has not lied to me. A young man stands on the stone floor, along with the Ontaran King, wearing the Ontaran crest – the antlers of a buck, twisted and removed from the animal.

"Asta!" comes a breathy voice from my left, and I turn to see my mother the queen. Her hair is in braids like mine, but it is dark brown and healthy, not starved for sunlight like mine. She's gained several sets of wrinkles around her eyes, mouth, and forehead. Older than I remember.

I stay in my spot next to the guard, unwilling to address the woman who left me to rot downstairs.

"Asta," she says again, taking a step toward me. I make to move backwards, but Dane's arm on my back gently holds me in place. He breathes in and out through his nose, as if to remind me.

"Come here, *kindj*," she says to me, calling me child. I breathe in and out through my nose and take a step toward my mother.

Why did you leave me? How could you not try to save me, to get me out of that hell? How could you let your child rot in a dusty basement for her childhood?

"Hello, móðir," I say back to her. My voice is weaker than I'd like it to be, considering that Eddor's greatest enemy stands mere feet from me. Before I can avoid her, she rushes to me and wraps me up in her arms, nestling her head on my shoulder. I've grown taller than her. She's softer than I remember, less wiry and muscled. Weaker.

"I've missed you, Asta," she says to me.

"Then why did you never come see me? Why didn't you come for me?" I whisper. She hears this and stiffens, releasing me. No words come out of her mouth, but her eyes show that she heard me - wounded, upset, fearful. Good. I do not forgive her.

I step back, out of the circle of her arms, refocusing my attention on the Ontarans.

One is a young man, thinly muscled with dark hair. The Ontaran crest blazes from his chest, and his overtunic is black and newly cut. The other man is older,

thicker, and he wears the Ontaran crown atop his head. My father has betrothed me to the Ontaran Prince. I feel the beginning of a panic, my breath slipping out of my lungs, but before I let it take control, I suck in a deep breath through my nose. In and out. I walk toward them, and though the heels of my shoes are quiet on the stone floor of the foyer, to me they sound like battle horns, going off one step at a time.

When I am closer, the Ontaran Prince salutes me with the Eddorian *kveðja*, a fist over his heart and then out to the side. A symbol of honesty, peace, and openness. All things the filthy Ontaran Prince does not possess.

Ontara and Eddor have been enemies for decades, since long before I was born. There are many stories that are “supposedly” the true reason for our never-ending quarrel, but the one my father told me was this: long ago, the two kings of Ontara and Eddor were brothers. They ruled one kingdom together, not two separate countries, but the Ontaran King - Vald - became greedy. He asked his brother for more and more land, until the Eddorian farmers were weak in their harvests, and the Eddorian people nearly starved. So, the older brother Tyrus, the Eddorian king, repossessed some of the lands taken by his younger brother Vald and declared Eddor his own kingdom, separate from Ontara. The younger king could no longer suck the life out of the Eddorian fields. But Vald was unhappy in his greed, and always sought to retake the land Eddor had given and then taken away. Nowadays, living on the border between the two kingdoms is risky. Land is overtaken easily.

I can still see the Ontaran greed, right on this prince's face. His arm is still held out in the Eddorian salute, as if mocking me.

"Is that supposed to impress me, Ontaran?" I ask, leaving all politeness out of my voice. My mother makes a strangled noise from behind me.

"I'm so sorry, Prince, she has been out of the presence of others for a long while, and she... she needs time to adjust. I'm sure she just meant a kind hello," my mother says.

"No, not really," I say, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

"Well, either way, Princess Asta, it is nice to meet you. My name is Prince Brokk, and you know my father, King Harald," he says. His mouth puckers at the end of his sentence, attempting to avoid a frown. Though I've been separated from people for a long time, I can understand when they are trying to seem pleasant. When they are lying. It's the same way my father looked when he told me *It's for your own good, Asta. This will protect you and Eddor. Liar.*

He looks down his long nose toward me, and reaches his hand out in between us. I make no move to place my hand in his.

"I know this is... uncomfortable, but I like to think we might be happy. Uniting the two kingdoms after so many years will be a great accomplishment for both Eddor and Ontara," he says. His long-fingered hand is still outstretched toward mine. I still don't take it. I do, however, lift my head up to face him fully, looking into his dim eyes.

"If you think that I will marry you just because my father said--"

"I said what?" comes a voice. *His voice.* My father has arrived.

Chapter 3

My father stands to my right, having entered the foyer from the library. He stands with his deep blue *kyrtill* and the golden Eddorian crown atop his balding head. His face looks nearly the same as it did the moment he shut the door on me, smiling grimly but obviously relieved that I was out of his way.

Asta, this will protect you and Eddor.

It's for your own good.

I've had your tutors leave all of your books, dear. Nothing will change.

Well, I've changed. And since the day he locked that door, I've been planning, plotting to make him feel the loneliness, the complete and total aloneness that I have felt for so long. Only in death can he understand that. But now that I see his unrepentant face, maybe death is too kind for my father. He has no idea what he has done to me, how many tears I have shed, how many screams ripped through my throat, how many times I wanted to take back what I was, the connection I had to this world. The first thing I say to him, after all of this time, after so long planning his sweet death, is

"Why?" My head is a swirl of hot anger and deep grief. I can't get a hold of what emotions are taking over. This day has been too much, seeing him is too much, it's all too much. My breath slips away, and my lungs are empty. I reach for air, but it is evasive, just out of reach. Someone supports my elbow, steadying me, and I see that it is the guard, Dane. His eyes bore into mine, willing me to remember to breathe, but I can't. For all of my hatred of that room, I wish for a moment I were

back in that basement, where nothing is new and I may suffer my panics alone, in peace. Not in front of kings.

"This day has been a lot for my young Asta," my father says, feigning sympathy for me, "let us retire to the dining room. We're here to celebrate, are we not? The first meeting of the Prince and my Princess should be accompanied by sweet wine. Shall we?"

Dane is still holding me up partially, and I hope he will not let me go. I want my pride - what's left of it - intact in front of my parents, in front of the Ontarans.

"Yes, Herryk, that sounds perfect," echoes my mother. The Ontarans follow my parents into our large, cold dining room, lit with chandeliers of candles and a sizeable fire at the far end of the room. Dane and I make our way last into the room. While the others sit down around the large wooden table, I stay back for a moment, regaining my breath and preparing myself for what I must do. I've got to rid myself of this betrothal. It must be done.

Metal silverware begins to clink together and wooden platters are set down. It is time. Dane looks directly at me. A warning? Encouragement? I'm not sure. It doesn't matter. I know what my goal is.

Maybe I can scoop my father's eyes out with a soup spoon.

"Asta, come join us," my mother's airy voice calls from the table. Dane stands up straight and maintains the guard's position. I turn and walk toward the table, my dress brushing against my ankles as I walk.

The only seat open is next to the Ontaran Prince and his father. Right in between them. Dammit.

"Asta, how are you feeling? I know this must be a lot for you, but we wanted to bring you here to explain the situation," says my father as I sit down in between the two Ontarans.

Oh you have plenty more to explain than just this situation, I think, but I keep my mouth shut. I take up my silverware and examine the food in front of me. In my room, they would most often bring me cold meat, cheeses, and breads. In front of me is warm duck, cut red potatoes, and freshly picked berries. *Oh how I've missed berries!* Ignoring everything around me, I stab a raspberry with my fork. When I bite down, tart and strong flavor explodes onto my tongue. It's bright, sweet, and perfect. The best thing that's happened to me since I walked up the stairs of the basement. Fresh food.

"Asta?" my father's voice breaks through my moment of happiness. I don't set down my fork - just in case - and look over to him across that table. Steam rises off his plate in front of his face.

"I just said that I think a betrothal between you and Brokk might be mutually beneficial for Eddor and Ontara. Things are -- rough -- between the kingdoms right now, and this might really unite us," he says.

"Rough might be an understatement," the Ontaran king mumbles beside me. His knuckles are white from grasping his fork.

"What is happening?" I ask, unafraid of the awkwardness. "More border disputes? Same as always?" King Harald grumbles next to me, and my father looks at his potatoes. There's more than they're letting on. The Ontaran Prince turns to face me.

"We're at a crossroads here, Asta. Things could easily become peaceful, if we marry and Eddor becomes part of Ontara. Or things could get messy, and there could be, that is... we could be..." says Brokk.

"At war," King Harald finishes for his son. His gaze meets my father's across the table. "Eddor has a problem with taking our land."

"Land that once rightfully belonged to Eddor," my father shoots back, and he's also holding his fork white-knuckled.

I pop another berry into my mouth. Maybe they'll all kill each other and I won't have to scoop anyone's eyeballs out. My mother is quiet, as she always is. As she was when my father grabbed my arm and took me down the flight of stairs into the basement.

I wonder how I am nothing like her, nor anything like my father.

"This argument is older than both of us, and we should put it to rest finally," says King Harald.

"I'll put it to rest when our land is returned and sustainable," my father says.

"It was our great great grandfather's fight, Herryk."

"That has yet to be resolved, *Harald*."

"Gentleman, the problem is solved," says Prince Brokk, and then he grabs my hand under the table. Shocked, I try to rip my hand out of his grip, my joints straining against his hold. I fail. He lifts our united hands above that table and a smile widens his lips. I keep trying to free myself and I keep failing.

"See? Age old quarrels die with newfound love," he says. The tips of my fingers are bright red from his tight grip. He rests our hands back down and finally

lets me go. My breathing has sped up, and I try to calm myself by refocusing on my berries. I will *not* marry him. I'm just going to eat my berries.

The two kings seem to be pleased by Brokk's proclamation, though, and their faces ease into smiles.

"You're right, Brokk," says the Ontaran King. "We should finally put old feuds out of our minds. This will be a new time, of peace and union between Ontara and Eddor." But the way he's saying it doesn't sound peaceful.

I dig into my roast duck while they continue talking, and consider. If I ruin this proposal, reject the prince, Eddor and Ontara will be at war, a war that has been boiling up for decades. It would not be pretty. But if I *do* marry the Prince, what on Earth is to stop them from the obvious: killing me, and in effect killing all of Eddor? Is everyone at this table going to ignore the curse? We all know of it. Is my father the type of king that would willingly give over his kingdom to his sworn enemy based on a flimsy promise?

"What's to stop you from marrying me and then killing me? It would destroy Eddor," I say to the table. "Isn't that what you really want?"

"No," King Harald quickly replies, "no, that's not what we want. Like I said, we want peace. Eddor and Ontara will finally be finished with this fight. You marry Brokk, we return some of your lands - particularly places with river access, and then this whole debate will be over."

I look around the table, at every individual face, and somehow I know that this debate is far from over.

I've got to talk to my father. First, to refuse this betrothal. Second, to get my revenge. Weak kings lead weak kingdoms, and Eddor is not known for being submissive. There is something my father is not telling me. Before dinner is finished, I've consumed most of the berries at the table and snuck my knife into my *hangerock*. For later.

"Take me to my father," I say to Dane when he escorts me out of dinner. My mother has run up to her rooms, overloaded by politics, and my father retired to his library again. The Ontaran King has left, but the Prince remains in the dining hall, speaking to one of his guards.

"That seems to be a constant request, and once again I must say no," he says to me. I shoot him a glare, and I think I see the beginning of a smile on his lips.

"I'll find him myself," I say, ignoring him. He raises an eyebrow, warning me, but I can escape him this time. Being above ground has given me a spark of life, has given me hope.

I hold up a finger to him, as if to tell him to wait, and then I sprint away from him. Bursting into my father's study, he looks up from his paperwork. Dane trails in behind me, breathing hard as I am.

"Why are you giving me over to Ontara? You know what they can do to me, to the kingdom! What is wrong with you? Why not fight them?"

A hot cord of anger tightens within me. I have to control my fury long enough to get some answers. Then I can ask the real questions.

"Asta, it's a delicate situation--"

"Then tell me what it is!" I insist. Dane has left the room, presumably because I'm pretty close to murder.

"We have no water access! We're dying!" he shouts, standing up to meet my height. He's a bit taller than me, and much stockier. But I'm not afraid. Not of him. I keep telling myself this.

"How? You've made my health *top priority*, remember? I'm just fine, so what could be wrong?" hatred seeps into my voice, and I long to grab the knife in my pocket. *For my own good? More like to save your own ass.*

"Ontara has been cutting off Eddorian ports, leaving us without trading options and without water sources. They're chopping us up."

"Why can't we fight them?" I'm not surprised that he's selling me over to them, but I'm surprised that his first instinct isn't to fight. If I remember anything about my father, it's his warring nature.

"We'd lose," he confesses, "our forces are weak, and without river access we'd have thin resources to support a fight like this."

"So you're giving up and selling me to them. Just *hoping* that they won't simply shoot an arrow into my back and end the Kingdom," I say. My fury boils up again, reaching my fingers and toes. My muscles hum with angry rhythm.

"Asta, I am so sorry for--"

"I don't accept any apology you have for me. You just *left me* down there, with no one and nothing. Only an explanation from an old Storybook, that damn *fræði*, to help me understand. My *father*, betraying me like that."

"*Kindj*, you--"

"No. You don't get to call me that," I say.

He could, before, when I looked up to him. When he brought me to council dinners. When he taught me to pick plums. My father was not always a cruel man.

He used to know the difference between protecting Eddor and protecting me.

He gets to call me *kindj* no longer. I stare into his eyes, so much like mine.

"Let me leave this place, forget my betrothal, and..." I might learn to forgive. I don't know if it's possible, but I could try. My anger is hot, but so is my grief, my despair. I've hated my father so much because I once loved him. We were once close. I could understand his indiscretion, my curse, the reasons behind it. I could, but not anymore. He was never sorry.

As I predicted, my father is not the man I thought he was.

"Asta, you may not leave." his eyebrows are pulled together in resignation. He will not change his mind. Rage spews from me.

"You have become weak," I tell him. "A king who bows to another is no King." I say, reciting an old proverb. And my hand slips into my pocket, searching for the dinner knife.

But it's not there.

"Do not call me weak, Asta," he says as if he's bored. "There is much you do not know."

Where is my knife? I search again in the other pocket of my *hangerock*, but it is nowhere to be found. I search the room with my eyes, looking for potential weapons. Chair leg? Fire poker?

"The guard will take you to get more acquainted with Brokk, and then you're going to sleep in your old room. You're lucky I'm not putting you back down into the basement, after that dinner. Please behave Asta. This is bigger than you, and you must understand that," he says to me, and then sits back down. I know the man my father used to be is gone, replaced by this soulless person in front of me. *The fire poker will do*, I think. Then I'll be queen and this war can begin. It's to my left, near the fire burning hotly inside the hearth.

I make a move toward the fire, and he doesn't move. As my hand closes around the cold metal, I consider life as a murderer. Can I really do this?

He left me for years. Years.

He never visited me. He took so much from me. My teachers, my mother, my freedom.

And now he's getting rid of me once more. All because he angered that sorceress.

This is his fault.

My fingers tighten on the poker.

All I wanted was a life, father. You took that away from me.

Princess-turned-murderer.

I take a step toward him. He doesn't look up from his papers.

Eddor is always more important.

I still have the scar down my arm from the mirror shard. Loneliness took over.

Scars made by his hand.

The door opens. Dane steps in. My father looks up. At me, at Dane. Dane looks at me, his head tilting to the side in obvious question. I've been caught. I put down the poker, as quietly as I can.

"You can leave, now, Asta. Brokk is probably waiting," my father says, already back to his paperwork, having no idea that I just intended to skewer him. Could I have done it? My own father? I should have. Maybe. Indecision pulls at my mind.

"Ready?" Dane says, still eyeing me strangely. I nod. And walk away from my chance. Stepping away from it rips me in half -- relieved, and vengeful. *This isn't over*, I promise myself. I will find a way to make him pay, to make him understand.

Dane and I step out of the room, leaving my father behind.

"Can't you just let me go upstairs to my room?" I ask him.

"You seem to think I am able to do what I please," he says, "But I actually have strict orders to follow."

"I won't tell anyone," I say.

"Just like I won't tell anyone what you almost just did?" he retorts, and it brings me up short. I freeze, knowing that he could full-well send me back down into the basement. Then he takes the dinner knife out of his own pocket, twirling it in his fingers. He watched me. And stopped me.

"I - it's, you--"

"You can't kill your father, Princess," he says, sliding the knife back into his pocket and resting a hand on my back and pushing me forward, toward the guest sitting rooms.

"I very well can," I mumble.

"I would advise against it," he says.

"And who are you to advise me in anything, *Dane*?" I say.

"Probably no one."

"Then shut up," I say. We're at the doors of the sitting room. His large hand falls from the small of my back, and cold replaces it.

"It will only be for ten minutes more or less," he says. I do not understand why we must adhere to ridiculous formalities of betrothals, but he's right. It's only for a few minutes. My chance to destroy this marriage.

I can do that.

"You won't by chance give that knife back to me, would you?" He shakes his head.

"Okay, then, how do I look?" I ask him, turning to face him in my green dress.

"Um," he says, "you look fine. Better than when I met you this morning."

Damn. I was hoping he'd say I look rabid. Ah, well. I'll have to find other ways to terrify the Ontaran Prince.

I pull some strands out of my braid, going for an unkempt look.

"Open that door in ten minutes," I say, and then burst through the door. I like that I can open doors now. I will burst through every one.

Chapter 4

The Prince sits on a small lounge in the center of the room, awaiting me. When I step in, he stands to greet me. I do not smile like a Princess would. I do not bow. A small frown pulls at his features for a moment, then disappears. He bows low, his thin body contracting.

"Princess," he says, his voice smooth and oily, "It is an honor to be chosen as your Prince. I hope that our union can truly end the age-old feud between Ontara and Eddor."

"Do you really want that?" I ask, making no movement toward him.

"Well, of course," he says, and he moves toward me. I step back.

"I didn't appreciate you grabbing me at dinner. In case you didn't already understand this, I have no intention of marrying you or letting you touch me at all," I say. His head tilts to the side and he steps forward again.

"Are you afraid of me, Princess Asta?" A smile reveals his teeth.

"No," I say back, attempting to stand my ground. "And if I were, it would be very well warranted. Ontarans have been cheating, stealing from, and killing Eddorians since the beginning of time."

"Lucky for us, after we marry, there will be no more Eddorians. Only Ontarans."

"Like hell," I say.

"Yes," he says, "I do suppose it might be hell for you." Whatever I have next to say escapes my lungs in a breath of air. *No.*

He gets nearer to me, crowding me against the nearest wall. My personal space disappears.

"I..." I say.

I'm trapped. I attempt to even my breathing, but I can't. He's too close.

Too close.

He's trapping me.

My lungs collapse in panic, and I find the strength to push against his chest, hard, forcing him to give me space.

"I wouldn't do that now, Asta" he says. His voice is a sharpened knife. "You wouldn't want to fight me. You could get *hurt*, and we wouldn't want that, now would we?" He emphasizes the word *hurt*, as if I don't know what could happen to Eddor. He comes back into my space.

I can't fight him, unless I don't care what happens to Eddor.

Right now, I *don't*.

He reaches for me, and I slap his hand away. He shoves me against the wall, getting a hold on my wrists and pinning them out to the side. My mind says fight, but my body says panic.

"Get away," my words are separated and slow. I'm not really saying them, it's only air. I tell myself to fight, to fight, to fight. My head wants to kick him, but my legs say no. I can't.

His damp breath is on my neck.

"I thought you would be like every other Eddorian girl I've met," he says, "big, muscled, and stupidly manly." He drops one of my arms and runs his finger down

the side of my face. Bile pushes up my throat. My arm is useless at my side. "But you, Princess, are quite a little prize. Thin, weak, *fragile*."

"Please," breathe out.

"Please? Please will not work on me, princess. I've worked too hard to get here, to get *you*. Once we marry, Ontara's problems will end. When the kingdom is united, my senseless father will finally understand my potential. And I'll be in command of double the land, double the people, double the resources."

So he's planned this. He's been itching to get me out, to take me, and finally my father agreed.

But I didn't.

His body presses against mine again, crowding me. And finally, my senses return.

"No," I say. He smiles, preparing to respond, but my knee is faster. It comes up fast, hitting him square between the legs. He stumbles back, bending at the waist. Taking the opportunity, I kick him once more in the stomach.

I want to say something, to shout at him, but fear curls in my belly again. The need to flee takes over, and I run out of the room. I don't look back to see the Prince, hoping he didn't follow.

When I open the door, Dane waits for me, standing with a straight back arms at his sides. Seeing me, his dark eyebrows pull together.

"Are you--" he starts.

"The meeting is over," I say, stalking past him and hoping he won't push the conversation. My head feels full, like it might explode. There's too much inside. One

day is too short of a time. After so many days, months, years of nothing, it's too much. I need time. I need out.

Dane follows me, but at a distance. He says nothing.

I have to get out of here. Cursed or not, I'm certainly not safe within castle walls. Maybe I can find safety without. I've no idea where I'll go, but *out* is a start.

Back in my room, I calm down and think through this day. Dane looked at me like I was crazy, but I opened and closed my door several times before I came to sit here on my bed. I need to know that it won't be locked from the outside, that it will reopen, that I control entrance and exit.

He's standing guard outside my door for the night. When he told me, I kindly informed him that he cannot possibly stay awake forever. He insisted. I'll still find a way out. I've already got the window open, and the night air slinks in through the opening.

As I sit on my bed alone, I remember this morning. Silence, dust, firelight, my *fræði*.

My *fræði*. The storybook. It's still down there. It's the only possession that comforted me. It kept me from smashing my head into the headboard, from breathing under the covers until there was no more air, from losing my mind. I could read it over and over and fuel the fire of hate burning in me. The anger would stop me, would remind me of my purpose, to get out and get revenge. My favorite words in the story echo in my head:

The sorceress meant to show the King how very valuable every small life is...

He didn't learn his lesson.

Craving the words, the stories - not just mine, there are many others in the *fræði* -- I search around my room for a book. I have always loved to read, mostly stories of forest monsters and princesses and tales from Eddor's history. There has to be something here from before. I hope that it can erase the memory of Brokk's hands on me, of his words burning in my head.

I hop off my bed, padding across the stone floor of my room barefoot. Next to my vanity is a bookcase, filled with things from my past -- from before. Many children's storybooks, picture books, and old school books. Most of the spines are worn and some broken from repeated use. I run my fingers along them, and the action distracts me from the day, from the unmanageable mess of emotions in my head.

My fingers halt on a particularly old book, brown fraying cloth covering the spine. It's an old folklore book, about Eddorian history. I pull it off the shelf and crawl back into bed, pulling the covers over my legs as the breeze from the window has gotten cooler.

Opening the cover, I slide my fingers over worn, yellowish pages. And as I flip through, my eyes find a title:

The Sorcerer's Mistake

I've read story after story about sorcerers and sorceresses, but this one doesn't pull any memories to the surface. Curious, I flip to the first page and begin to read. The words *do* seem familiar, but the story sounds new.

The greatest Sorcerer of Eddor was powerful, undefeated, and brave. He had grown up studying under several famous sorcerers and sorceresses, and as he became a grown man, citizens from all over Eddor would come to him for wishes, requests, and teaching. He had the true gift of sorcery from the Gods, and was revered by most.

Though he was well-loved, he was also hated - by those who hated sorcery, and by other powerful sorcerers who longed for his recognition, his power. Several times, the Sorcerer was attacked, and each time, he was able to fend off his assailant. His power grew, but so did his paranoia. Great power had given him great fear.

The Sorcerer began to remain in his home at all times - fear of leaving kept him trapped inside. He also kept his family - wife, children - locked away with him.

Despite the limitations, the Sorcerer's power only grew. He no longer had to leave his home to turn people into stone, or to bless them with good crops for the year. Still, his power never gave him enough confidence to step outside.

One night, the Sorcerer went to his bed for the night, but when he stepped into his room, he saw that the window was wide open, and that someone was in bed with his wife.

Outraged and fearful, he attacked the intruder cruelly, knowing that the assailant had come to harm him and his family. He lifted his hands, and with a snap of his fingers, broke the intruder's neck.

The dreadful noise woke the Sorcerer's wife, and she screamed with horror and threw back the covers of the bed.

Underneath was their youngest son, who had come to his parent's bed after a nightmare. The mother had opened the window wide to let in fresh air to calm the child.

The Sorcerer looked upon the horror he had created. His son lay in bed, neck snapped by his own hand. His wife's shrieks echoed through their home.

For curses cannot be undone.

No sorcerer or sorceress had ever managed to take back the power that flowed from their fingers. Despite this, the sorcerer decided to try. He gathered up his dead son into his arms and tried to pull the power of the spell out of him so that he might be restored to life.

It might have been because of the incredible power of the Sorcerer, his undying love for his son, or his pure determination, but the son's neck snapped back into place, and his breath was restored to him. He came back to life.

After news spread of this great work of magic, visitors came from all over the kingdom to see the boy brought back to life by his father's power.

The Sorcerer - Magni inn rikki - is known as the greatest sorcerer of all time because of his power, and his ability to do the impossible - to take the curse back.

The final words of the story echo in my mind. I definitely haven't read this before. It's well known that curses cannot be taken back. No one even attempts it, because it often disrupts nature or backfires. I've read enough stories to know that.

But...

But it's possible for them to be undone. My heartbeat picks up. If she is strong enough - if that sorceress has enough power - she could take this curse away from me.

That feeling, that *need* to get out of here returns, stronger than before. If I can find her, she can help me. New purpose blossoms inside of me, and alongside my hatred for my father is hope for freedom, for a life without a curse. No need for protection. No need to be locked away. Normalcy. Emotion fills me and leaks out with a few hopeful tears. It might just be possible.

If I can get out.

I snap the book shut and set it aside.

The window is my best option, as Dane is guarding the door. The sweet night breeze pools into the room, causing the white curtains to billow toward my bed.

It's likely a bad plan, but a plan nonetheless.

There is so much more out there for me than this. I won't hold myself prisoner after being trapped for so long.

My father's death can wait until I get this curse removed. What's more, my absence will drive him mad.

I can live with that.

The floor is cold when my bare toes hit the stone. I step over to the open window to examine my options. From the second floor, a jump might really hurt me. Directly below me outside is dry dirt and sparse grass. There are trees as well, but they are too far out to reach from my window.

The fresh air teases me, and I breathe it in through my nose. Fresh, damp, free. I could be free. If I hang from the windowsill by my fingers, the fall would be a lot shorter than simply jumping out. Survivable, definitely. I might even get out unscathed.

Getting out of the castle perimeter will be another obstacle, but I decide to worry about that when it comes.

Taking one more deep breath almost sickens me. The sweetness is almost too much compared to the dust of the basement.

And then, before fear can stop me, I swing one leg over the windowsill. It is somewhat difficult with my long white nightgown, but I manage.

When I swing my second leg over the edge of the window, an excited rush of air escapes my lips.

I can find her.

I can escape Brokk.

I will return to get my revenge. I don't notice him until it's too late.

His arms wrap around my middle, and quickly pull me back through the window. I push away from my intruder and turn, finding Dane standing before me.

Many emotions swirl inside of me - despair, sadness, fear, hopelessness - but I focus on the one I'm best at.

Rage.

"What do you think you're *doing* in here?!" I whisper-yell into his face. His dark eyes bore back into my angry gaze.

"Keeping you from doing something ridiculous," he whispers right back at me.

"I had a chance to get out of this hell-hole. To be free from all of this. Why do you always get in my way?" I step into his space - not caring that my nightgown doesn't hide very much - and approach him. Anger flows in between us. He towers over me.

"I do what I have to do to keep you from causing irreparable damage to this kingdom, *Princess*," Dane says, "and for some reason, you are intent on destroying yourself along with this kingdom. Maybe you should try thinking of someone other than yourself for a single moment!"

"My *apologies*," I spit back, "I guess I should have chosen a different curse for myself - oh, wait, I didn't choose this!"

"You don't know the damage you can cause," he says.

"You don't know the damage *he's* caused," I shoot back, thinking of my father. I'm tainted, shattered, broken.

And still a prisoner. I step back from Dane and look up into his face. It is unreadable, stoic.

He brushes past me, his dark form stepping over to the window. His hands reach out for the window panes, pulling them closed and locking them. I stand still, powerless and still trapped.

"I locked it," he says, turning to me, "and I'll get a guard to watch the window from the outside. This is just to protect you, *Princess*," his eyes seem sincere in the dim candlelight of my room.

"I don't care," I say.

"Some people do," he replies. With that, he looks me over once and then slips out of my bedroom. I can feel his presence through the wooden door.

Turning around, I launch myself onto my bed.

I lost my chance, I think, but then amend the statement: *I lost this chance*.

There will be others, and I will be ready. After three years of being trapped, there's no way I'm giving up after one day.

Tomorrow as a new opportunity; I will find my way out of here, and to the doorstep of Yrsa the sorceress.

She's going to take back her curse. And if she's still angry with my father, we can come back here and kill him together.

I fall asleep while planning my next escape.

I dream of freedom - from this castle and from this curse.

Chapter 5

When my bedroom door opens in the morning, I'm ready.

My plan is a simple one, but effective. I've lugged my water basin - full - to the doorway. It's heavy in my arms, but it should do the job. The goal is to shock them, then make my escape.

"Asta," says one of the ladies maids, but before she can finish her sentence, I've launched the water at her and the others who stand in the doorway. Water splashes them, and they all take a stunned step back - a step that gives me just enough room to slip past them.

The only thing standing in my way is a soaking wet brunette boy.

"Asta," he says, putting his hands out to stop me, like he's attempting to corral a startled animal. But before he can stop me, I use the only weapon I have left - the empty water basin.

I'm not very strong, and it doesn't really go very far, but I lob the wooden bowl at him and watch it hit him around the middle. Taking my chance, I sprint down the hallway and to the stairs.

Hopefully I won't fall down them this time. It didn't work out so well three years ago. But I make it, and then I'm on the first floor, air pumping through my lungs and my soft boots slamming against the stone floor.

If I can make it to the garden, that's my best bet out of here. I can find shelter somewhere in Boer and make my way from there. Hope and adrenaline and heat course through my veins. Yrsa is out there. Magni inn rikki is out there. My life can be my own.

But apparently not today.

As I round the corner to the hall that leads to the garden, I find myself surrounded by guards. How could they possibly know where I was headed? I might be crazy, but I know I wasn't thinking out loud when I planned this.

My feet come to an abrupt halt and my heart slams in my chest. There are at least eight guards standing along the walls and in front of the door. They don't look happy to see me. Quick steps sound behind me and I spin.

"You're predictable," Dane spits out, panting. Sweat - or is that still from the water I poured on him? - shines on his face. "It's obvious that you would try for the

gardens, they lead out of the castle grounds most easily." He bends down, placing his hands on his knees to support his upper half.

"I'll find my way out," I say, "It is only a matter of time. You can't keep me here forever. My father can't lock me up forever." Or maybe he can. Guards close in on me from both sides of the hallway. Unfamiliar faces, tall figures. I try not to let the fear swallow me as they take my arms. I can't give up. I have to get out of here. I struggle against their hold, attempting to pull my arms free.

I'll fight until the last moment I possibly can. They drag me through hallway after hallway. Luckily, the guards who hold me don't take me to the basement. Instead, they take me to my father's office.

The wooden doors are pushed aside and I stumble in with a shove from a guard. Dane has followed us and now steps into the office after me and closes the doors.

Thankful to have people's hands off of me, I take a full deep breath, filling my lungs and shaking off the feeling of panic within me.

My father stands behind his desk much like yesterday, but rather than having his full attention on a set of papers in front of him, he's got his eyes locked on mine. How could I have possibly tried to kill a person whose eyes are so like my own? I almost stabbed him yesterday.

And then I think of his rough hand shoving me down the basement stairs, injuries still healing from my fall. All of my memories dissipate, and I remember exactly why I want to kill him.

Anger feels like a forest fire, burning through everything so that all that remains is flames.

"Good morning, Asta," my father's rough voice cuts through my thoughts.

"It would be, if you'd let me go outside," I say. Dane steps forward before I can find the fire poker and finish off what I started yesterday.

"Last night she tried to escape through her window, and this morning she made a run for it out of her bedroom to the gardens," he says. My father makes an uncomfortable face, his features pulling together in frustration, and his hands make fists that he then presses onto the desk that separates us.

"Maybe a trip back downstairs will fix your rebellious behaviour," he growls, staring me down. I try not to show it on my face, but anxiety fills me at his words. Escape is not possible from down there. I've failed enough times to know. I don't quite understand it, but something about that room is impenetrable. And horrifying.

I cannot go back down there. Not if I want to escape and find Yrsa.

My mouth opens to protest, but before I can say anything, a new voice interrupts me. I had no idea someone else was in the room with us.

"No, Herryk," says a gravelly female voice from the other side of the room. It's not well-lit over there, so all I see is an outline. A dark cloak, a covered face.

"Don't put that girl back down there. Look at what the room has done to her already."

Done to me? Who is this woman?

"Gróa, this is not your business," my father says. Confusion spikes in my mind. Only when she steps into the firelight do I understand. Her hair is wild, and

dark curls frame her face. She wears a similar *hangerock* to mine, simple and bland. It's her dark cloak that sets her apart. It's long, flowing, royal blue with gold flecks all over.

My father has his own sorceress.

When the realization hits me, I immediately step back. I don't have the greatest history with sorceresses. I try to step through the door to leave, but Dane stands in the way. He's always in my way. Maybe I can find another fire poker for him as well as my father.

"This is Gróa," my father says, "She is a sorceress I have hired to look after you for a while." *Look after me?*

"I don't need looking after," I say. If I explain it to him, he might just let me go. If there was a chance I could get rid of the curse. "There is a way to get rid of the curse."

I hoped this would get his full attention, but he only glares at me and sighs.

"You read too many books and legends, Asta. Gróa, go ahead," he says.

The woman approaches me slowly, and there's really nowhere for me to go unless I want to hide behind Dane. My pride keeps me from flinching away.

"I was right in my suspicions, Herryk," she mumbles while scanning my face a little too closely, "The protections I put on the room dampened the powers of the curse, but the separation the girl has had from nature has weakened her and slowed her development."

I hate the way she's talking about me. And, protections?

"You put spells on that room? Hey!" I say as she reaches out to touch my face. I bump into Dane at my back. She still gets her hands on my face, turning my head from one side to the other like a medic. I try to ignore her and continue with my plea.

"There is a way for the curse to be taken back," I say as the woman - Gróa - lifts one of my arms. "If I can go find this sorceress, Yrsa, I can convince her to take it back. It has been done before, I read *The Sorcerer's Mistake*. Magi inn rikki took the curse back - he brought his son back to life! All of this could be over if you let me go find Yrsa." The woman has lifted my other arm, looking at it as if I have pox. She's crazier than I am.

"No, Asta, it will all be over when you walk out of the doors of this castle and get hurt - or die. Where would Eddor be then? There's no chance I'm letting you run around an infested forest for a sorceress who might be gone, or dead," he says.

The sorceress in front of me tugs on the ends of my stringy blonde hair, and I step sideways, out of her reach and away from Dane. I don't want anyone touching me.

"Are you not listening to me? There could be a way to get rid of it! Then you wouldn't have to worry about your *precious* Eddor any longer." I step over to his desk. I'm one one side, he's on the other.

"That story is most likely fiction. No one I have met has seen Magni. And you leaving is out of the question."

That sorceress is near me again. I can feel her breathing behind me. My annoyance grows.

"Why is this woman here?" I ask, some rage slipping out into my voice. The woman takes one of my hands in her wrinkled ones, and looks closely at my fingers.

"She's here to see how strong this curse is, and to see what her spell has done to you on top of the curse you already have. Her spell on your room - to protect you, to keep you from doing anything too rash to yourself - has had a significant effect on you."

As if one curse wasn't enough.

"You hired a sorceress to keep me from killing myself," I say it like a statement because it's true. I thought about it all the time - tried it a few times - but something always stopped me. It must have been her spell. It messed with my mind.

My father looks down at his hands still placed on his desk and stays silent. It's the sorceress who answers.

"Yes. But the spell had negative effects we did not foresee. Your connection to nature is deep, but has been strained for so long. Because this is so vital to your life, you have become weak, and not grown how you naturally would have. Though," she mutters, as if she is only speaking to herself, "we have not really seen these effects in the nature of the kingdom. It is quite interesting. Quite." Her voice scratches the inside of my skull and I cannot take any more. I've had enough.

Enough curses, enough spells, enough people messing with me. I will find my way out on my own. By force if need be.

"The curse is irremovable?" my father asks the woman.

"From what I can tell, it's the strongest curse I've seen in years. It is a part of her, tethered to her soul," she says back, still trying to touch me, to grab my hand.

Suddenly, quickly, she looks up and over to my father, her large bug-like eyes blinking repeatedly.

My patience has run out. I'm going to stick all of these people with fire pokers. I'll fight my way out of the castle with one.

"Brokk will be at dinner again this evening," says my father, sitting back down in his wooden desk chair. "Behave yourself. I heard you attacked him last night. That will not happen again. Think of the safety and security of this kingdom, Asta," he says.

The fire poker is so close. A hot spiral of rage envelops me, and I launch toward it. I'm just crazy enough to do it. And I might regret it later. But right now?

Vengeance sounds great.

It's in my hand before anyone can get a hold of me, and I pitch the weapon toward my father, feet away. Dane reaches me too late, and I'm empty handed by the time he gets his arms around me to stop me. We both watch the poker.

Inches before the poker hits my father, it stops midair and clatters to the floor loudly.

My breath of relief freezes in my throat. *No.*

The woman. Gróa.

Her arms are outstretched, fingers splayed with her palms facing downward.

After a beat of silence, she lowers her hands and returns to her normal posture, shoulders barely hunched and her large eyes darting frantically around the room. I look over to my father. Rage, betrayal, and confusion all cross his features. His brows pull together and his eyes narrow.

"Get out," he says with barely contained rage. Blood vessels bulge at his temples. I should be scared of him, but all I feel is disappointment that the weapon missed its mark. He glances over to Dane.

"Get her out of here," he huffs. His eyes flick back to mine. "You will marry that Ontaran. It's war or marriage, and I choose not to go to war."

In a blur, Dane pulls me out of the room. I'm too exhausted to shout after my father, to tell him what I think: that I'm not giving up. I'm *his* daughter, after all.

I'll be out of this castle by dinnertime.

Chapter 6

I'm not one for pomp. Never wore makeup in the basement. Never really went to dances - a safety hazard, of course. So when Helena comes at me again with a makeup brush, I block it with my hands.

"You already did my hair, can't we just forget about makeup?" I ask. "It's not like I'm trying to impress anyone here. I'm going for the opposite, actually."

She makes a *tsk* noise, brandishing the brush once again.

"Stay put," she warns me, and I grudgingly obey. I'll only be a puppet for a few more hours. And I might as well look good, even if the makeup makes my face feel like I'm wearing a tight mask. While she makes me up, I look at her. Thick red hair in braids down her back, large eyes set in her head, a rounded nose, and plump lips, squished to the side in concentration.

"Close your eye," she commands, holding a black makeup pencil up to one of my eyes. I close one eye and consider her with the other.

"What is it like outside?" I ask. She glances out of my window quickly.

"Looks chilly, but it isn't raining," she replies, refocusing on my face.

"No," I say, "what is it like outside of the castle? In Boer? Have you ever left the city? What is it like?" A laugh huffs past her lips and she smiles.

"Close the other eye." I do.

"Well?"

"You shouldn't be getting any ideas about getting out of here, girl. You know how that isn't going to happen. I'm sorry about the curse, but your safety is top priority," she says.

"Sure, sure, but *have* you left the castle? What's it like?" She lifts my chin with her rough finger.

"Not as romantic and wonderful as you think it is, Princess. There are plenty of trees, plenty of brothels, and plenty of dangerous ways for you to die and in turn destroy Eddor." she pokes my nose.

"You know I've never even left the castle grounds, right? Curiosity is warranted," I say, standing to examine the new dress she's put me in.

"Yes, I know. I was around for some of your childhood, Asta." And I remember her, too. Helena was once my mother's handmaiden.

"Did you choose to come serve me when you knew I was being taken out of the basement?"

"Yes I did," she says, "but you didn't used to be so stubborn, that's for sure. I remember you liking makeup..." Still trying to finish my makeup even though I've stepped away, she sprinkles some powder onto my nose and I blow it off, giggling.

"Life used to be easier. And, for the record, I believe I was always this stubborn," I tell her. She's finished with the makeup, thankfully, and I can fully see myself in the mirror.

"Well, I don't *look* crazy," I say at my reflection. I'm wearing a more formal green dress instead of a normal *hangerock*, and the fabric hugs my body in a way that makes me look fuller than I really am. The neckline isn't plunging, but it dips down a bit around my collarbones. It's a plain dark green, but plain is how I like it.

"No," Helena says, "you don't look it. But the moment you open your mouth, you give it away." She might be serious, but her lips are smiling in the mirror behind me. I open my eyes wider and pull my lips into a manic smile, looking as crazy as I can.

Helena laughs, and I break out into quiet laughter as well. It's nice to have someone on my side -- well, as much on my side as anyone can be. My laughter dies out.

"Helena, I have to get out of here. Yrsa is out there somewhere in Eddor, and if I can find her, she might be able to break the curse." Our smiles fade, and I turn to face her.

"Child, that doesn't sound like a good idea. There is too much up to chance. Everyone --"

"Everyone could die, I could die, Eddor will be over, yes I know. But it's not just about that," I say, fiddling with the ends of my long sleeves, "I'm curious about Eddor. I want to see it, to meet the people, to live my own life." I sound stupid. I must. The look on her face - pity, probably - makes me want to disappear. Is it ridiculous for me to want that?

"Oh, Asta," she says, and pulls one of my cold hands into her warm ones. "It's a wonderful thing to want to go explore. You've got a curiosity that rivals anyone else's in these walls, but you are an unlucky girl. The king will never let you out, surely."

My heart sinks. I know that already.

"But," she says, and my eyes meet her blue ones, "A girl with your curiosity - and cleverness - will find her way. And I'm not going to close any doors."

When I smile slyly at her, she winks.

I'll have to force my way out of here. And I will.

I've tasted fresh air, and I can no longer breathe dust. I'll get outside.

I step out the door and head to dinner.

What I'm planning is a risk. It might backfire. But it's the quickest way to get myself out of this castle and on my way to finding Yrsa. And if they truly believe I'm crazy, this might just work.

"Asta?" says a voice, and I look up from my meal. Tonight, it's some sort of casserole with red meat and vegetables.

Brokk is the one who has spoken to me, and thankfully he's sitting across the table from me. When I entered the room and saw him, I nearly made a run for it. Luckily, I was able to force myself to sit down. I can't get out encounter out of my mind. It's always there, fear lingering. He repeats what he has just said.

"I said that you should visit Ontara soon. It will be good for you to see it. I can take you to a theatrical in Vesalland," his slimy eyes linger on my chest as he says it. I might kick him under the table.

"Yes, I think that would be a wonderful idea," says his father. "She needs to get more acquainted with Ontara anyway. It's a very.... refined place, Asta. You might grow to like it very much." I resist the urge to say anything, and stab my fork into the casserole. There are no berries tonight.

The men return to conversation amongst themselves. There are more people at dinner tonight. For some reason, my father has stupidly invited some of the nobles to join us for the meal. If he thinks I am going to behave as he asked me to earlier, he is so absolutely wrong.

I look over to the window, where Dane stands like always, his back straight and eyes forward. The world outside the window looks quiet and peaceful. And windy - leaves sneak past the window as the sun is setting, following the guidance of the air. It might be foolish to believe that Yrsa is somewhere out there waiting for me. And it is probably foolish to think that she might be able to reverse my curse -

Magni inn rikki is likely the best sorcerer of all time - but I still have hope. Is stupid hope better than resignation? It is for me.

I want to go outside. I will.

Grabbing a roll, I reach for the butter knife inconspicuously. Dane was smart enough to take the knife off of my table setting today. I smooth butter over the warm bread and bite into it, savoring the taste and the softness. Instead of putting the butter knife back, I set it on my plate. No one will miss it for now.

As I finish the roll and examine the knife more, I know that it won't work. A butter knife will not do. I have to find something else. A nobleman sits next to me, huge and a bit drunk - he has a few empty glasses of wine surrounding him. If I can distract him for just a moment...

"Sir?" I ask, raising my voice loud enough so that I can be heard over his obnoxious laughter. His reaction is delayed, but eventually he turns to me.

"Prisoner Princess, what can I do for you?" I nearly stab him with my fork at the remark, but I maintain my cool.

"Well, sir, I seem to have dropped my napkin underneath the table where you're sitting," I say with the least amount of malice possible. "Would you be kind enough to get it for me?" I even add a fake smile for effect.

He heaves air into his lungs, pushing his breath out into my face. It reeks of wine and tobacco.

"Well," he says, "anything for the Princess of Eddor." Careful not to touch me, he backs his wooden chair up and leans his upper half down to the ground where I

threw my napkin. While his massive form is searching, I glance around to see if anyone is looking, and when I see that no one is, I reach for his serrated steak knife. It's hidden in my skirts by the time he manages to sit back up and hand me my napkin.

"Here you are, your Highness," he says, sarcasm dripping off his words. He doesn't see me as royalty. No one here probably does. I'm simply a pawn to them.

Not for long. I smile at him.

"Thank you," I reply, and turn back to my own plate. Once I find the right moment, this will all be over - one way or another.

I only have so much time for this to work. I look over to my father. He hasn't looked at me the whole night long, and I'm not surprised. After attempted murder, people tend to get a little angry. I get it.

He's speaking quietly with a noble on his left side, while King Harald of Ontara watches intently.

I'm going to do this.

My heart pumps in my chest. No one notices when I slip the knife out of my skirts and into my hands. They all converse quietly around the table, sipping their wine and chewing their food.

This isn't going to work.

I am only flesh and bone

No.

I am much more than that.

I stand, take a breath, and lift the serrated knife to my own throat.

Chapter 7

Quiet chaos breaks around me. My father is the first one to notice, and his eyes grow huge when he sees me standing with a knife to my throat.

I'm not pressing too hard, but I can feel my blood gathering at the spot where the blade meets my skin. Strangely, it isn't painful. Yet.

Many voices whisper loudly.

"Princess!"

"What is she doing?"

"Gods help us."

"Asta." comes my father's voice. His eyes are trained on the weapon. When they glance to a figure behind me, I push the knife harder against the side of my neck.

"Stop!" I shout, and the person behind me - whoever it is - freezes. I hear the footsteps back away. "If anyone comes close to me, I'll do it."

It's not a bluff.

My father knows that.

"Asta," he says my name again. "Put it down." His voice is the only one. Low, strong, and quiet. I do not remove the knife. I am finished with my father. I will get what I want. I'll take it.

Or I'll die.

"You could kill every person in this room right now if you do this," my father says. His hands are up in caution, to put me at ease.

"I know what I could do," I say back. My throat constricts against the metal. I press down a little harder, so I feel some pain and draw a little blood - enough for father to see.

Several people gasp, and when I hear footsteps behind me again, I turn my head to see, making the cut a fraction deeper.

A male guard stands behind me, his face red - with fury? Frustration? - and his arms outstretched.

"Don't come any closer," I say quietly. I expect my voice to shudder, my words to fail, but it sounds strong. Stoic. I know my options.

The man backs away once more, glancing at the blood running down onto my green dress. I glance at it myself and see the red flowing over my collarbone. I feel the bite, but somehow the pain is numbed.

I clear my throat and look right at my father.

"I will leave this castle. Yrsa is out there somewhere, and you will let me go find her." He scoffs, and *laughs*.

"You want to go outside?" he yells, making some of the people in the dining room jump. "*That's* what this is about? This whole dramatic display, just so you can go follow your dream of getting this curse taken away?" I want to take this knife and launch it at him, but my position of power holds. No one comes near me.

"Yes. I will leave this castle and be allowed to go find the Sorceress, or I will saw this knife through my neck until I bleed out onto your precious stone floors," I say. The longer I stand in this position, the more my neck begins to hurt. I feel the

pain. I don't know if I could actually tear the knife through more of my skin, but I need my father to believe I will.

"You will kill the entire Kingdom? You'd throw away your own life?" he asks, and as soon as the words leave his mouth I am shouting back at him.

"My own life?! I'm not even *living*!" I scream at him, my rage leaking into my tone. I try to reign it in when I begin to speak once more. "The way I see it, father, is that you can say no to me right now and die along with everyone here, or you can say yes and live a little longer."

Silence encompasses the room for a few moments, and I think I might have cut an important place in my neck, because blood is pooling quickly now and I'm beginning to feel lightheaded. I'll wait. I've waited for years. This is nothing.

"Kinj..."

"I thought I told you not to call me that," I say back, adjusting my grip on the knife.

"A--"

"I. Will. Do this." I say to him, pressing the tip of the knife into my neck a bit more.

Grant me the freedom you once took from me. He's breathing heavily, unable to let me go, yet unable to let me die. Either way, he loses power.

"You're out of your mind," he says. His hands ball into fists. Still, no one moves.

I smile and, despite the pain, push the knife a fraction deeper. My mind feels separated from the rest of myself, waiting in between the pain of reality and the

hope of freedom. He has to concede. He will. I can't wait for much longer, either - my head feels cloudy.

"I'll do it," says a voice, and I turn to see Dane standing on my left. "I'll take her." What? He can't be serious. He steps closer to my father and I take a step away from them.

"You know why I'm here, your highness," Dane says, shifting from one foot to the other, "You know I won't let anything happen to her." Dane and my father share a knowing look, and seconds go by.

"It's too dangerous," my father says. Dane gestures to me with one hand,

"And what's the alternative? Let me take her. I could bring a few others, we could get supplies, and be home in a fortnight. She wants to go find her ridiculous sorceress? I'll take her. And we will return when she doesn't get the answers she's looking for."

I move to say something, but stop myself. My freedom hangs precariously in the balance, and speaking up isn't a good idea.

They both look over at me, and the eyes of all the bystanders drill into me as well. I might be losing consciousness, because I start to see black spots pop up in my vision every once in a while.

"Fine!" my father says, and scans the room. As his gaze wanders over the nobles and other men in the room, their eyes meet the floor, or anywhere but at me or my father. I clear my throat, and all the attention reverts back to me, knife still at my throat. I'm taking my chance.

"Let's go," I say to Dane, looking toward him. Instead of responding, he looks over to my father.

"You know I won't let anything happen," he says, "I'll do everything I can." My father nods to him. There is more going on here than I understand. I shift my feet back and forth, itching to get out of here and away from prying eyes.

"Remember why you came here, Dane," my father responds, and they nod to one another. Dane steps over toward me, and the guards let us through the dining hall doors. As soon as we are out and the doors are closed behind us, I drop the knife and press my hand to the wound, trying to stop the constant bleeding. Dane moves to help me, but I back away, stepping backward in the empty hallway.

"What were you talking about?" I ask him. Silence fills the air between us. I ask again, frustration leaking into my words. "What did you mean? 'You know why I'm here'? What was that about, what am I missing?"

His face hardens and his lips form a tight line.

"What?" I say, my voice rising.

"My whole family is dead because of you!" he bursts out, stepping closer to me. Shock strikes me hard, and my hand falls from my neck. *Because of me?* He glances both ways down the empty hallway before going on.

"When you fell down that staircase three years ago, Boer was destroyed, Asta. You never saw the damage you caused! And we lived in a bad house, and when the storms came... my family's dead now. Except for me. And I promised myself that I'd never let something like that happen to another family like mine. I decided to come here, to guard you, so you wouldn't do something like *this!*" he says, spitting

out the last words. "What were you thinking? You have no idea the damage you could cause."

No words come to my mind in response. He is right. His family's death, it's my fault. Sorry does not even come close to how much I owe him.

"We should get the hell out of here if you actually want to leave," he says, running a hand through his dark hair. "Let me grab some people to travel with us, and then we can go get a horse and cart. Tonight, we'll find a tavern in Boer. After that, I hope you know what you've signed up for, Princess, because the forest is not kind."

Minutes later, we are ready, and I take my first steps outside of the castle grounds.

Chapter 8

In a cottage in the southern edge of Eddor, the sorceress pulls out a travel bag.

"Where are we going?" the boy says to her as she sets the bag on the wooden table in their small kitchen. It's a small cabin, barely big enough to contain its two inhabitants. The boy stands up from his small chair by the fire and approaches the sorceress. As he stands in front of her, Yrsa stuffs food, extra clothing, and other objects into the bag. The boy waits for an answer. The sun has almost set for the day, and the dying rays of light barely illuminate the pair.

"She is coming," Yrsa says, "The cursed princess is out."

The boy shakes his head back and forth, placing a hand over the opening of the half-filled travel bag. Sometimes he has to stop the sorceress - she is always on the edge of going mad.

"That's not possible," he says, "Why would they ever let her out?" Yrsa moves the boy's hand and places a thick, leather bound book into the bag. When her eyes meet the boys, there is no trace of delusion in her eyes. For a moment, they stand there, frozen.

"I do not know, but I can feel her. So pack your things." She steps away to gather more, but the boy blocks her path.

"Why must we flee? Why not let her come?" Yrsa steps past him and picks up a water bucket by the thin wooden doorway.

"We must flee, because I cannot give her what she desires. She will not find us."

The sorceress steps over to the fireplace and pours the entire contents of the water onto the remaining flames. She and the boy leave the house as the last of the steam billows out from the fireplace.

Chapter 9

As the horse cart pulls away from the castle and descends toward Boer, I don't feel the sense of satisfaction I thought I would after all of this time. The righteous justice I thought I would feel has instead been replaced with pain - and disappointment. My neck is still bleeding onto my dark dress, and as we make our way through the castle grounds, I look around at the death I have caused. Half of the

flowers in the garden have wilted, and the sun that was showing through the window earlier has now hidden behind a thick layer of clouds and grayness. All of it leaves my mind in a guilty mess.

"I hope it was worth it," says Dane, eyeing the ruined garden and the crunching grass below our cart. When he looks back at me and sees that blood still seeps from the wound in my neck, he ruffles in his uniform until he comes up with a strip of cloth. I take it from his outstretched hand and press it to the spot where the knife met my skin.

"It was," I say quietly, guilt for his family still ripping through me. This curse has not only ruined my life - it's ruined countless lives.

"To be honest, Princes, I didn't think you were getting out of that dining room alive. I'm surprised you're still conscious after losing that much blood," says the only other woman with us. "I'm Nadia." She places her fist over her heart in greeting. I nod my head back to her.

"Asta," I say in introduction.

"I think it was brave, what she did in there," says the guy sitting next to her. He has black hair and tan skin, and when he speaks, Nadia turns to glance at him.

"Brave, yes, but also crazy," she looks over to me, "You didn't just put your life on the line, Princess. Everyone was at risk because of you." My face reddens, and I glance back over to Dane who's looking down the road to Boer. I've put too many people's lives on the line. I readjust my position on the flat surface of the cart, angling myself away from the three people sitting in it with me.

In a few minutes, we're past the castle grounds and on the Boer city streets.

For some reason, I expected the outside to be quiet. I was wrong. It's full of life, noise, and more people than I've ever seen. As our cart bumps its way through Boer, I can't keep from being distracted by each and every thing - vendors stepping out to offer fresh produce, children running through the streets, and restaurants and taverns bursting with sound. I'm leaning over the side of the cart to get a better view of a restaurant when Dane grabs my shoulder and pulls me back.

"I'm not going to fall," I say, attempting to lean out again, but he pulls me back once more. My fists ball up. Guilt or not, he doesn't have to be callous to me. "I've never been outside before, Dane. Can I at least attempt to explore? Carefully?" He faces me, his eyes digging into mine.

"No," he says. He throws his arms out to the side. "Look around you. Everywhere I look, I see the possibility for complete devastation. That fruit vendor a few minutes ago? His cart was leaning hard to one side. It could have fallen right on you. This cart is a problem within itself - it's got to be a hundred years old or something. What if this just collapses? Will a windstorm appear? And here you are, leaning out of the side of this thing like you've got nothing to lose. My only goal is to protect this kingdom, not help you go on a wild vacation. How can I do that if you're throwing yourself off the side of this cart?" After he finishes, he runs a hand through his hair and slumps against the inside of the cart. A long breath escapes his lips.

"Wow," says the boy driving the cart, "You really need some ale. Anyone want to make a stop for drinks?"

"Yes!" I say, partially because I want to, and partially because I need to get out of this damned cart before anger consumes me.

"We don't have time," says Dane.

"Well I'm making time," I say, and before anyone can stop me I swing myself over the side of the cart. Dane reaches out to grab me, but he's too late. It's not a far drop, and I don't hurt myself. I land on my hands and knees on the dirt road, and when I stand up I am face to face with some sort of shop. Looking to my right, I see that the cart has swerved off to the side of the narrow city street, and all four of my companions are headed toward me.

I slip inside the shop.

"Welcome, *meyla*," says a woman inside the wooden building. She's a large woman with long brown hair and a similarly colored *hangerock*.

"Hello," I say back, looking around at what her shop contains. Swatches of fabric in every color imaginable surround me, and dresses lay on tables, along with pants, tunics, and even small clothes for children.

"You're a small thing, aren't you? You might be able to find something over there," she says, pointing in a direction to my left. Nodding and smiling at the woman, I head in that direction. The moment I am hidden from view, I hear four bodies shuffle into the front of the store. It makes me smile to know that I'm free. I'm doing what I want. I also helps that this is absolutely frustrating to Dane. I'll take a small win when I can get one. It's not a large store, but I'm good at hiding.

"Princess," says a quiet voice, and I turn to see the boy who drives the cart. I'm caught. I turn to run, but he places a finger on his lips to stop me. He's not telling the others he's found me. A small smile pulls at my lips. I hear footsteps coming, and

glance up to the boy, eyes wide. He looks up, and pulls something. A long curtain of red fabric falls, shielding us from view.

"I'm Bekker," he whispers when the footsteps have faded. He places his fist over his heart. I mimic his motion.

"Asta," I say, "but you probably already knew that."

"I did. But I didn't know you liked sneaking around so much - I would have introduced myself earlier. We might just be great friends," he says. His face is tinted red by the shadow of the fabric, as I suspect mine is too. Friends. He lifts one of his hands, and in it he holds a small purse, which I'm guessing is full of coins.

"Would you like a new dress, Princess? You seem to have stained the one you're wearing. Just a bit," he says, and I laugh.

"A bit?" I say, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, it's barely noticeable," he replies, smiling. I look down at my dress, drenched in blood and now some dirt.

"I would love a new dress, Bekker," I say, taking the bag of coins out of his outstretched hand.

"How's red?" he asks, pulling down more of the fabric that surrounds us. It topples down onto my head and falls to our feet. I attempt to catch it, but it's too slippery. Giggling, I try to find my way out of the mountain of red he's created.

"Red's perfect," I say and step through the tables until I find one with decent-looking tunics. I rifle through the pile until I spot a red one. It looks a bit long, but it's bright with white embroidering. Probably expensive. Holding it up to my frame, I turn to see Bekker behind me. "How's this?"

"Very regal," he says, bending at the waist to bow. I snort and push his shoulders back up. No one bows to a princess like me. Looking around, I see that the others seem to have left the shop completely. They probably went frantically looking somewhere else.

"Come on," I say, opening the small purse. When I get a look inside, I gasp. "Where did you get this?" I'm curious as to how a driver acquired this much money - I see some silver *pennigr* inside.

"I might have lifted it off of a very irritable guard," he says. Dane. Guilt wraps around my heart - this isn't right. After everything I've done to him, can I do this? While he's out there looking for me right now?

"I don't know about this, Bekker. Dane--" I start.

"Dane needs to learn that he can't keep you cooped up all the time. And that being an angry louse is not his full time job. You need a new dress anyway, Ast-- Princess," he says.

"Call me Asta, please," I say.

"Asta," he says, "It's one dress. What's he going to do? Kill you?"

I snort.

"Alright, alright," I say, stepping over to the counter where the storeowner stands.

"Troublemaker," Bekker says under his breath, and I stifle a laugh.

"This all, *meyla*?" the woman asks as I hand her the dress I chose. I nod back, and hand her the coins in payment. As she bustles around the counter to put away the money, she keeps a skeptical eye on me.

"You sure you're alright, girl? You look thin, and that's a nasty stain on that dress," she says. Her head tilts to the side and her dark braids shift with the movement.

"All the more reason to buy a new dress," says Bekker, grasping my elbow and trying to shuffle me away.

"They say the princess left the castle, you know," says the woman, "that she looks skinny, small. Word's going around."

"Very interesting, have a nice day!" Bekker says and practically yanks me out the wooden doorway. He looks in all directions before stepping out into the street.

"How would people know I've left?" I ask, following his steps down the street.

"News travels fast. And we probably shouldn't go around telling people, either. You're a walking target, Asta," he says.

"But--"

"Princess!" comes a female voice to my left. "It's her, Kol! Dane!" Nadia runs onto the street toward me, and I step away from her and closer to Bekker. Kol and Dane step out from a side street where they must have been looking for me, following Nadia. Kol is tall, with concerned eyes, while Dane is a bit shorter, stronger, and his eyes are... angry. As he approaches, I slide even closer to Bekker. A friend. When the three of them meet us, I speak before Dane can yell at me.

"I'd been stuck in that horse cart for hours, and I needed a break. I didn't mean for you to lose me, I just wanted some time to explore," I say. The red dress is heavy in my fingers. Dane steps closer to me. Glances down at the dress.

"No more exploring. Not without every one of us present. No jumping off the cart. And," he pulls at the material of the dress, fanning it out to get a better look.

"Where did you get this?" My cheeks redden and I glance down.

"That was me," says Bekker from behind me, and steps to my side. He puts his fist out in the space between the three of us, and in it is the black purse, coins shifting inside. Dane's eyes widen rapidly, then return to his masked calm expression. He swipes the bag from Bekker's hand and his dark eyes meet mine.

"You needed a new dress anyway," he says. I can't tell if he's furious or honest or anything. He looks back to the other guards and nods his head down the road. They run ahead, and soon Bekker follows them. I make to leave with Bekker, but Dane's hand on my shoulder stops me. His touch is gentle but firm. A cool wind brushes between us, blowing stray blonde hairs into my face. I tuck them back and look up at him, embarrassed. I don't regret what I did, but I feel bad that it frustrated him. His hand drops from my shoulder.

"I need to have some time to explore this world," I say. "I know it is dangerous. I know. But I've been... I've been down there for so long. I've seen nothing like any of this." His gaze travels to the setting sun. We need to find somewhere to sleep soon. He runs a frustrated hand through his dark thick hair. Once. Twice.

"Do you think I *want* to keep you from exploring? I don't. It is what I must do. For this Kingdom and for the King. I have orders, and your desire to explore is not going to keep me from my assignment." His eyes hold no remorse. They're empty. The kindness I remember seeing back in the castle is gone. He's on a job. "You need

to stop running away and jumping out of the cart. This trip is so that we can find that sorceress. That is all. Understood?" His hand is on my shoulder again, pushing me in the direction of the cart and Bekker sitting on the driver's seat.

My fists ball up holding the red dress. I can still feel my father's thumb pressing down on me - keeping me *safe*. His guards are lackeys, keeping me in line away from real life. After a few steps with Dane's hand on my shoulder, I jerk away from him.

"You know what? I'm not sorry this dress was so expensive. And I'm not sorry I ran. Even though I have this *stupid* curse, I deserve to have a life. I deserve to live for five minutes. And for the record, there were no monsters in that dress shop. It was all clear. So no worries, loyal subject." I soak the words with menace before I spew them out, and then stomp in the fading evening light over to the hose cart. Nadia and Kol are sitting close together on the right of the open cart, so I pull myself up onto the left side of the cart and sit as close as I can to the front, to Bekker. A friend.

Dane makes his way over to the cart, and when he lifts himself up into the back with us, Bekker noddges the two horses at the front and they begin pulling.

"We'll stop in the next city. There's a cheap tavern on the south side," Dane says. Minutes tick by in silence and I examine my surroundings. We've left the town we were in, and I glance back at the lanterns still lit in front of homes and alehouses. The whole place is still bustling with sound and people. Looking ahead of us, the nature is dark. Steep, thin trees line the dirt road on either side of us, and the sun

has fully set, leaving a heavy darkness behind. Every few moments, I can see through the full branches to the sky beyond. Stars dot the sky, bright and far away.

"Princess?" comes Nadia's voice. I tear my eyes from the stars to look at her. Brown hair, narrow face, thin lips, serious eyes. "Do you like stars? You know they say the Gods put some of them in place, but let others wander through the sky." Nadia looks up and blinks a few times.

"I know," I say back, watching Kol stare at Nadia. "I've read that many times."

"Did you have a lot of books?" she asks, looking back down at me to gauge my reaction. Surprisingly, I'm not upset. I'm sure everyone is curious as to how I learned anything at all in a dank basement for years. The strange girl underground.

"I did. My tutors came to teach me for a while before they... before they didn't come back," I say, looking down and pretending to be very interested in my hands.

"I'm sorry," Nadia says quietly. I let silence fill the space, listening to the bump of the cart and the puffing of the horses. I'm sorry, too.

"I'm out now," I say, trying to meet her eyes in the dim light of the stars.

The night darkens, and the silence follows us until we reach the tavern.

I'm out, and I won't let any more of my life pass me by. Not even if Dane stands in my way. Tonight, I'm going to explore.

Chapter 10

Bekker finally pulls the cart to a slow stop at the side of a tavern -- or a brothel. It is loud, half-lit, and reeks of ale.

"Is this the right place?" I ask Dane, glancing to the thick wooden door with plenty of large men and tall women standing outside. I look back at him to see him nodding. He swings himself over the side of the cart and puts a hand out to me. Instead of taking it, I hop over without his help. I'm not ready to let him help me yet. I will always feel guilty for what I did to his family, but I am not his prisoner.

"Really?" he rolls his eyes and lowers his hand. Kol and Nadia stand on either side of me as we step toward the tavern, Dane in the lead stepping through the door. Many of the people outside give me curious looks, either because of my personal guards or my haggard appearance. I look right back at them. One man holds two mugs of ale in either hand, his eyes watery. A stout woman with blonde braids hangs on a thin man leaning up against the wall. She's whispering things to him that I wish I couldn't hear. Before I can see any more, I am ushered through the door and into a rowdy restaurant.

People fill the entire tavern, laughing loudly and scraping their cups against the wooden tables. Women weave between tables with drinks in their hands, and men throw things into a large fireplace at the back of the enormous space. Flames blow up into the chimney. I'm mesmerized and overwhelmed. Nadia's rests her hand on my back and I jump, unused to touch or the proximity of so many people. Staring at blank walls for so long has left me knowing so few people.

"Come on, Princess," she says, and I take a few steps to follow Dane.

"Call me Asta," I say, "And... aren't we trying *not* to draw attention to ourselves? This seems like a lot of attention." I take a few more steps, and see Dane catch the attention of the biggest man in the room, the bartender. He's as big as a

forest bear, or as big as how I imagine them to be, as I have never seen one. He has muscled arms, deep brown skin, thick black hair, and a wide, bright smile.

"Dane!" bellows the man, sliding a couple drinks across the counter before stepping around to greet my guard. "Never thought I'd see you around these parts again, boy! What in gods brings you here?" He slaps Dane on the back and pulls him close for a moment. Dane's lips pull into a smile -- one of the first I've seen. His eyes hold laughter and real happiness.

"Hey there, Dag," Dane says, and when he looks back to us, his smile fades, as if he remembers why he's here. Boisterous laughter erupts from one of the tables, and we all turn to glance at it. I can't see much over shoulders and people blocking my view, and when I turn my gaze back to the group, I catch the man's eyes on me.

"Who is this *meyla* you've brought along?" Dag asks. Dane opens his mouth to respond, but I beat him to it.

"I'm not a child, you don't need to call me that," I say. I almost tell him who I am, but I hold back.

"She's fiery, Dane, I like it," he laughs. My pulse beats harder in my veins, and I try to respond again, but Nadia's hand on my arm stops me. Dane steps closer, forcing Dag, me, and my guards into a private circle. Nadia at my side, Kol right behind me. Dane and Dag across from us.

"Listen, Dag, we need a few rooms, if you don't mind," says Dane, "We're not exactly looking for a lot of attention, either, if we could keep it quiet." Dag furrows his dark brows, and looks from Dane to Nadia and Kol, and finally his eyes meet

mine. He looks down, and in the faint light of the tavern, I'm sure he can see the dried blood soaking my dress.

"Are you in trouble, Dane? You know I'm here for you, but I want to know what's going on," he says, rolling his shoulders back as if in preparation for a fight.

"Nothing, it's just that, we are just passing through, and it's better if --"

I step forward in the small space, closer to Dag, so that he can see me better.

"I'm Asta," I say, reaching out a tentative hand. To my left, Dane's eyes nearly double in size - I'd laugh if it didn't look like he's going to scream at me. "Listen, we need his help. We might as well be honest." Dag dips his head to the side to see my face better.

"Asta, daughter of King Herryk, Asta?" Dag asks, lifting a massive hand to his hair. I glance at Dane for a moment before nodding. Dane looks angry, but... afraid? His wary eyes meet Dag as mine do.

"Dag, I'm sorry. We shouldn't have brought her here. We'll go. I've always brought trouble to your door, and I don't want to bring any more. I am so sorry," Dane says, the words tumbling quickly one after the other. He steps to me and motions for us to leave. His hand pulls mine. Before we get far, Dag stops us.

"We've got rooms, Dane," he says. Dane falters, turning to look at this man, his friend somehow. "There's always room for you, boy. And whoever you bring with you... even if they're the child of the lousy king." He looks at me with those last words, and I can't help it.

I laugh. And laugh. I don't know what the people really think of my father, and hearing an honest opinion is... funny. And good.

"She's tired," Nadia says, as if that can excuse my craziness. When I finish laughing, I look up at Dag with new appreciation. Maybe he can be another new friend. People in the tavern are finally starting to notice that something out of the ordinary is happening, and some half-drunk men and women are gazing at us curiously. Dag waves his hand to us, ushering all five of us over to a narrow wooden staircase I hadn't noticed before.

"The first two rooms on the right are open. Take those, boy," Dag says to Dane. Dane's chest rises, then falls, his dark uniform moving with the breath. A weight seems to lift off his shoulders.

"Thank you, Dag. I owe you," Dane says. He meets the man's eyes. Silence fills the air for a moment, and then Dag's lips pull into a crooked grin, and he barks out a deep, rumbling laugh.

"You'll always owe me, boy. Now get up there, before more people notice you in town," Dag says, playfully shoving Dane's shoulder toward the stairs. The man turns to me next. He bows at the waist, still taller than me even bent in half. Heat rushes into my cheeks, warming me. He does not understand that I'm not really royalty. I'm just the girl from the basement.

"Your highness," he says quietly, "I hope your stay here is comfortable." I nod quickly and he straightens back up.

"Thank you," I say to him, and step up the stairs after Dane, cheeks still pink.

Upstairs, Kol and Bekker disappear into the first room and Nadia steps into the second. Dane and I stand in the dim hallway for a moment, silence falling between us.

"How do you know--"

"In the morning we'll--" we speak at the same time.

"Sorry," he says, gesturing for me to speak.

"How do you know that man, Dag?" I ask, examining his dark eyes. His gaze flicks to mine, then slips away. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other. Is he uncomfortable?

"He sort of took me in after my family died," he says, not looking at me.

"Oh," I say. Tension pulls between us.

My fault.

Yrsa's fault.

My father's fault.

"He's a really great man," Dane continues, bringing me back out of my toxic thoughts. "Dag is the closest thing I have to family anymore. I used to cause a lot of trouble after my family died, acting out and taking advantage of Dag's kindness. I have learned a lot from him, and I try not to... well, I guess I still bring him trouble." He looks up at me with a grim smile.

"Are you saying I'm trouble?" I reply, crossing my arms over my chest.

"A fugitive princess looking for a dangerous sorceress? Yeah, I'd definitely say you're trouble," he says, a real smile starting to pull at his lips.

"I'm attempting to rid myself of trouble, remember?"

"Sure you are, Princess," says Dane, running a hand through his hair. "I will see you in the morning, and we'll work on some training after breakfast, alright? I'll be awake most of the night in case you need anything, too."

"Don't you sleep?"

"Not much, when I'm worried about our world getting destroyed if you trip or bump your head too hard," he says. I sigh dramatically and step over to the room Nadia is in.

"I'll be fine," I say. He nods, and by his expression it seems like he might not believe me.

"Sleep well, Princess," he says, stepping into the other room as I step into mine.

Nadia is fast asleep on the floor next to the small cot that I suppose is mine.

It will go unused tonight. Quietly as I can, I step over to the window - unlocked, slightly ajar.

The blackness of the night is scared away by a small campfire a few yards away from the tavern. I can smell the burning wood, see the few people surrounding the flames.

That's where I'm going. I'm only on the second story. A tree with thick branches reaches out toward my window - my way out. I'll climb. I can do this.

A breeze pushes through the window, chilling me. Making the least amount of noise I can, I step back through the small room to the small bag of things I brought with me. I pull open the top of the small bag and take out a hooded jacket, one of the few possessions I brought with me. I slip it on.

Nadia's stirs and I freeze, not even daring to breathe. After a while, her breathing returns to normal. Tiptoeing to the open window, I take one quiet breath

before swing a leg over the ledge. My arms reach for the nearest branch, and I descend.

Chapter 11

I make it to the ground unscathed, thank the gods. All I need to do now is get myself over to that fire unseen. I pull my hood up to cover my head and some of my face. I sense something is wrong before I hear it: rough breathing behind me. I panic as arms grab me from behind.

Memories flash before me.

Guards grabbing at my hands.

Trying the door handle until my fingers are numb.

Brokk pushing me into a corner.

My throat closes, and my mouth gapes open to find air. Only short gasps escape me.

Not again. I attempt to push at the strong arms. I cough. Where is the air? I blink tears out of my eyes.

Trapped, is all my mind can process, terror shoots through me, immobilizing me. I still can't get any air. My knees buckle. Of course I would get taken on my first night of freedom.

"Shit," I hear, and the arms loosen. "Shit, I forgot," the voice says. He lets go. I sink but the arms hold me up now, and in the dim light coming off of the fire I see Dane's worried eyes.

You're safe, he's saying to me, over and over. And I know that now, my mind does. He was waiting outside my window, probably knowing I'd try to slip out. Protecting me. Guarding me.

My body doesn't know that yet. My breaths are still gasps, my legs still won't work. He helps lower me gently to the grass. My hands feel tingly and my head is unfocused. Dane pushes my hood back and places his hands on either side of my face.

"I'm sorry, Asta," he says, "I -- dammit! I forgot. I need you to breathe, Asta. In and out." I try to nod and follow his directions, but I can't focus. Looking down, I can just barely see the grass around me dying in the dim light. It's wilting around me like the ripple effect in a pond. It's spreading. I hiccup, but don't get any air.

Dane's strong fingers pull my face back up to his.

"Asta," he says, "In." I look into his eyes and take one ragged breath in. "Out," he says, and I push it out. We do this again, and again. Until I've memorized his eyes and my breathing is normal.

As the panic recedes, shame and embarrassment and frustration take its place. I just killed everything around me. This time, that's on *him*. I push his hands off of my face and scramble back in the dead grass. Nearby weeds have wilted as well, along with some thick roots of the tree near the window.

"Asta, I--" he starts, but I hold up a hand to stop him.

"Don't," I say, and struggle to my feet. I readjust my jacket, pulling the fabric away from my neck. It still feels like I'm suffocating. After a moment composing

myself, I look back up to Dane, who now stands a few feet away from me, pity and worry etched on his face. I want to slap the pity right off.

"I am going to the fire," I say, "And if you try to stop me, I swear to the gods I will stab you - or myself. Either way, it will do damage."

"You don't even have a knife," he says, taking a step closer.

"Shut up," I reply, stepping past him toward the fire. He's right.

"I only meant to keep you from running off. You need your rest. You're still healing from that wound..." his words drop off as I continue to walk away from him. "Asta!" he says again, and I just walk faster.

When I reach the bonfire, there are a few people scattered around, most of them sitting on logs and gazing at an older woman speaking. I pick the log closest to me and sit on the ground in front of it, leaning my back up against the rough bark. The fire is half-dead and the old woman is already in the middle of some story, but I listen anyway. A few people gaze at me, but their attention is easily veered back to the woman. She's tall, slender, with two white braids falling on either side of her head. I let my fingers fall into the grass around me, tangling in the cold fine blades.

Dane sits down beside me, his expression hard.

"Asta..." he starts, but I shake my head and don't look at him. I focus on the woman, trying to listen to her story. Dane gives up and turns his attention to her as well.

"Magni inn Rikki knew that almost nothing could save his son," says the woman, and I immediately know the story. *The Sorcerer's Mistake*. The more I listen,

though, the more I notice the changes in the story. Something's different about it. Wrong. My fingers go back to exploring through blades of grass as she talks.

"So, despite all of the warnings, and everything his teachers before him had said, the father decided to try saving his son by reversing the curse. And so he did. He put his hand on his son and felt the curse within him. When he drew the magic out of the boy, however, he drew out more than he expected. By drawing out the curse - reversing it - he also drew out the boy's soul. Though he was alive again, the boy was never the same," she says.

This can't be right. That isn't the real story. It's not the one in my storybook from the other night.

But the old woman continues after hacking out a rough cough.

"Without his soul, the boy was a monster. He terrorized his family, his siblings, and others in the town. He became the destructive villain his father spent his life trying to evade. All this to show that curses, no matter the sorcerer, can never be taken back. Magic is always fair. When it is taken back, it twists itself so it can take something along with it."

The woman sits down at her log at the fire and stares into the flames. Most of the others get up to leave, but I remain rooted to the ground.

Magic is always fair.

I can't let myself believe this version of the story. It's not the correct story, surely.

I push myself up and stride over to the woman.

"Excuse me," I say, lowering myself to her level and attempting to make eye contact. The woman keeps her focus on the flames. "Well, you see, I was just wondering where you heard that story. I have heard that story as well, you know, but it had a much different ending. Instead of the son being--"

She cuts me off and her eyes shoot to mine.

"Do you mean the version they print in the storybooks? Where everyone has a happy ending? You have a lot to learn if you think any of those stories are true, girl," she says. Her gaze digs into mine. "Our country always seems to forget the truth of the legends, changing them how they please and telling their children that magic is beautiful and fun. If there's one thing you need to know, *meyla*, it's that magic... it's the opposite of beautiful. It's dangerous, hideous, and unforgiving. Stay away from it, girl, and you've got a much better chance of surviving." She hobbles up and walks away from the bonfire, entering the side door of the tavern. I have a million questions to ask her.

I will have to find her tomorrow.

"Hey," comes Dane's voice, and because I have forgotten he's here, I let out a startled yelp. "Sorry! Sorry," he says, moving toward me and sitting down on the grass next to me. The dying fire casts shadows on his face, giving me a shifting, half view of him.

"You're fine," I say, breathing in the chilly night air. I tuck strands of my hair behind my ear, weirdly nervous. I'm probably still embarrassed from earlier. Dane clears his throat, meets my eyes, then looks over into the fire.

"I wanted to apologize," he says, his voice low. "I forgot that you sometimes panic, and I knew you would climb out that window. I figured I'd grab you before you got too far and hurt yourself, but I forgot... I'm sorry." He runs a hand through his dark hair, eyes still on the fire.

"It's all right," I say. "It's no wonder I was so easy to put away." The words spill out of me. "I can't even... I can't even fight or defend myself. I can't control it." I pull my legs to my chest and place my chin on my knees.

Weak. my mind says to me. *Afraid.* How am I supposed to survive out here if I am so easily overtaken?

Dane pulls his gaze away from the fire, toward me, "I was planning on doing some training with you, to help your endurance for travel, but I can also help you work through some self-defense work if you'd like," he says, glancing back into the dying flames.

"Really?"

"Yes," he says.

"All right," I reply, releasing my knees. My thin legs straighten out in front of me. "Do you really think you can teach me?"

A small smile. "I guess we'll find out, won't we? I think you most definitely *can* have the strength. The hard part will be keeping you from panicking."

My head lowers

"I know."

A beat of silence passes between us before he asks, "When did the attacks start?"

"As soon as they put me away," I say. For some reason, I don't stop there. I could, but I don't. The words keep coming. "The first time, I didn't know what was happening to me. I thought I might be dying, after all they did to keep me from getting hurt. It was almost funny, until I passed out. I woke up not knowing where I was for a moment. But then of course, who could forget something like that? It happened regularly after that, when I got scared no one was ever going to come back, or when I thought about how I would never get out..." The rest of my thoughts scatter as I remember who I'm talking to. He's just the same as the people who put me down there in the first place.

I have to remember that he works for my father. That he's just like them. Isn't he?

"We should go back," he says, standing and brushing himself off before reaching a hand down to me. I take it. I want to believe he's not like them. I want just one person to protect me because *I* am worth protecting, aside from Eddor. But I can't let myself want that. He pulls me up to my feet, and for a moment we're chest to chest. He steps back and looks down, releasing my hand. Though the fire's almost dead, I can still feel its heat.

"Dane," I start. His gaze snaps to the right, away from me.

"Shh," he hisses, holding a finger up to me. I almost reach out and snap his finger off. I hate being ignored. I follow his gaze but see nothing in the darkness beyond the fire.

"I don't see anything," I whisper. He doesn't move, gaze still locked on something I can't see. Soon, a figure steps out of the treeline. Dane reacts immediately, pulling me behind him with a firm hand on my waist.

I try to move around him or at least get a better view, but Dane holds me behind him. A towering man steps toward the tavern. He makes no indication that he has seen us standing near the fire. He pushes through a back door of the tavern, but before he disappears from view, I see it.

The Ontaran Crest. The twisted antlers.

It's spread across the man's back, emblazoned on his *kyrtill*.

We're being followed.

Chapter 12

"How do you know they're following us for sure?" I ask at breakfast the next day. We are all seated at a circular table on the first floor of the tavern, and the place that was filled last night is now deserted. After seeing the man last night, Dane and I rushed up to our rooms. He's convinced the Ontarans are after us - I think it might be coincidence.

Dane lets out a sigh next to me.

"Why else would there be an Ontaran in the middle of a small town of Eddor? We saw him, Asta. It makes sense. Especially after your father agreed to give you over to Ontara," Dane says, scooping up some egg with a fork. Anger shoots through my veins with the reminder of what my father did.

My need for revenge sits at the back of my mind constantly, ready to explode at any moment. My anger is difficult to tame.

"Well I think we should get the hell out if anyone is following us," says Nadia. I look over to her across the table. Her brows are pulled together, and her food sits untouched. "The last thing I want is to be attacked by Ontara while we're with the Princess. If they get a hold of her, we're all dead, no offense, Asta." She glances at me before staring down at her plate full of eggs, sausage, and toast.

"I agree," says Dane. "We need to leave as soon as possible. After breakfast let's plan to pack our things and head out. If they are following us, they also know where we are going, so any head start is better than no head start. We have to hope they're not following us to attack, but to just protect their own interests and make sure they're still getting what they want."

"I want to stay at least today, and then we can leave tomorrow," I say desperately, "I need to at least do some training before living in the wild. And we really don't know that they're following us. Let's stay one more night so that we can make sure we're prepared and ready for anything." I need to talk to the woman from the campfire again, to ask her more. What other stories aren't true? What has she heard about Yrsa?

My guards eye each other, weighing options. I pick up several berries from a bowl in the middle of the table and pop them into my mouth. Bekker, sitting on the other side of me, has eaten half of the food off the table. He hasn't said a word all morning. Maybe Dane scolded him after we hid yesterday at the market.

"Fine," says Dane, "but only because we still need supplies and I need to train you in some basic self defense. But if we see any sign of Ontarans, we run. Immediately. Got it?"

I nod my head. That's enough time for me to get some training and get answers out of the woman from last night.

I reach for more berries, my mind spinning with plans.